

CHARLES ALDEN SELTZER

THE RANGE BOSS

"FIREBRAND" TREVISON

"BEAU" RAND



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THE RANGE BOSS
"FIREBRAND" TREVISON
"BEAU" RAND

Complete and Unabridged

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CHAPTER I

AT CALAMITY CROSSING

GETTING up the shoulder of the mesa was no easy job, but judging from the actions and appearance of wiry pony and rider it was a job that would be accomplished. For part of the distance, it is true, the man thought it best to dismount, drive the pony ahead of him, and follow on foot. At length, however, they reached the top of the mesa, and after a breathing spell the man mounted and rode across the table-land.

A short lope brought pony and rider to a point where the mesa sloped down again to meet a plain that stretched for miles, to merge into some foothills. A faint trail came from somewhere through the foothills, wound over the plain, and followed a slope that descended to a river below the rider, crossed the stream, led over a level, up another slope, to another plain, and so away into the distance.

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Up and down the river the water ran deeply in a canyon, the painted buttes that flanked it lending an appearance of constriction to its course, but at the crossing it broadened formidably and swirled splashingly around numerous rocks that littered its course.

The man's gaze rested briefly on the river and the crossing.

"She's travelin' some, this mornin'," he said aloud, mentally referring to the water. "I reckon that mud over there must be hub deep on a buckboard," he added, looking at the level on the opposite side of the crossing. "I'd say, if anybody was to ask me, that last night's rain has made Calamity some risky this mornin' — for a buckboard." He drew out a silver timepiece and consulted it with grave deliberation. "It's eleven. They'd be due about now — if the Eight O'clock was on time — which she's never been knowed to be." He returned the timepiece to the pocket and rode along the edge of the mesa away from the river, his gaze concentrated at the point where the trail on the plains below him vanished into the distant foothills. A little later he again halted the pony, swung crossways in the saddle and rolled a cigar-

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ette, and while smoking and watching drew out two pistols, took out the cylinders, replaced them, and wiped and polished the metal until the guns glittered brightly in the swimming sunlight. He considered them long before restoring them to their places, doubt in his gaze. "I reckon she's been raised a lot different," was his mental conclusion.

"But anyway, I reckon there ain't nothin' in Poughkeepsie's name to give anyone comin' from there any right to put on airs." He tossed the butt of the cigarette away and frowned, continuing his soliloquy: "The Flyin' W ain't no place for a lady. Jim Pickett an' Tom Chavis ain't fit for no lady to look at—let alone talkin' to them. There's others, too. Now, if she was comin' to the Diamond H—why, shucks! Mebbe she wouldn't think I'm any better than Pickett an' Chavis! If she looks anything like her picture, though, she's got sense. An' —"

He saw the pony flick its ears erect, and he followed its gaze to see on the plain's trail, far over near where it melted into the foothills, a moving speck crawling toward him.

He swung back into the saddle and smilingly patted the pony's neck.

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"You was expectin' them too, wasn't you, Patches? I reckon you're a right knowin' horse!"

He wheeled the pony and urged it slowly back over the mesa, riding along near the edge until he reached a point behind a heavy post-oak thicket, where he pulled the pony to a halt. From here he would not be observed from the trail on the plains, and he again twisted in the saddle, sagging against the high pommel and drawing the wide brim of his hat well over his eyes, shading them as he peered intently at the moving speck.

He watched for half an hour, while the speck grew larger in his vision, finally assuming definite shape. He recognized the buckboard and the blacks that were pulling it; they had been inseparable during the past two years — for Bill Harkness, the Flying W owner, would drive no others after his last sickness had seized him, the sickness which had finally finished him some months before. The blacks were coming rapidly, shortening the distance with the tireless lope that the plains' animal uses so effectively, and as they neared the point on the mesa where the rider had stationed himself, the latter parted the branches of the thicket and peered between them, his eyes agleam, the color deepening in his face.

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"There's four of them in the buckboard," he said aloud, astonished, as the vehicle came nearer; "an' Wes Vickers ain't with them! Now, what do you think of that! Wes told me there'd be only the girl an' her aunt an' uncle. It's a man, too, an' he's doin' the drivin'! I reckon Wes got drunk an' they left him behind." He reflected a moment, watching with narrowed eyes, his brows in a frown. "That guy doin' the drivin' is a stranger, Patches," he said. "Why, it's mighty plain. Four in the buckboard, with them bags an' trunks an' things, makes a full house, an' there wasn't no room for Wes!" He grinned.

The buckboard swung close to the foot of the slope below him, and he eagerly scrutinized the occupants, his gaze lingering long on the girl on the seat beside the driver. She had looked for one flashing instant toward him, her attention drawn, no doubt, by the fringing green of the mesa, and he had caught a good glimpse of her face. It was just like the picture that Wes Vickers had surreptitiously brought to him one day some weeks before, after Harkness' death, when, in talking with Wes about the niece who was now the sole owner of the Flying W, and who was coming soon to manage her property, he had evinced

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curiosity. He had kept the picture, in spite of Vickers' remonstrances, and had studied it many times. He studied it now, after the passage of the buckboard, and was supremely pleased, for the likeness did not flatter her.

Displeasure came into his eyes, though, when he thought of the driver. He was strangely disturbed over the thought that the driver had accompanied her from the East. He knew the driver was an Easterner, for no Westerner would ever rig himself out in such an absurd fashion — the cream-colored Stetson with the high pointed crown, extra wide brim with nickel spangles around the band, a white shirt with a broad turn-down collar and a flowing colored tie — blue; a cartridge belt that fitted snugly around his waist, yellow with newness, so that the man on the mesa almost imagined he could hear it creak when its owner moved; corduroy riding-breeches, tight at the knees, and glistening boots with stiff tops. And — here the observer's eyes gleamed with derision — as the buckboard passed, he had caught a glimpse of a nickeled spur, with long rowels, on one of the ridiculous boots.

He chuckled, his face wreathing in smiles as he urged the pony along the edge of the mesa, follow-

ing the buckboard. He drew up presently at a point just above the buckboard, keeping discreetly behind some brush that he might not be seen, and gravely considered the vehicle and its occupants. The buckboard had stopped at the edge of the water, and the blacks were drinking. The girl was talking; the watcher heard her voice distinctly.

"What a rough, grim country!" she said. "It is beautiful, though."

"She's a knowin' girl," mused the rider, strangely pleased that she should like the world he lived in. For it was his world; he had been born here.

"Don't you think so, Willard?" added the girl.

The rider strained his ears for the answer. It came, grumbly:

"I suppose it's well enough — for the clodhoppers that live here."

The girl laughed tolerantly; the rider on the mesa smiled. "I reckon I ain't goin' to like Willard a heap, Patches," he said to the pony; "he's runnin' down our country." He considered the girl and the driver gravely, and again spoke to the pony. "Do you reckon he's her brother, Patches? I expect it ain't possible — they're so different."

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"Do you think it is quite safe?" The girl's voice reached him again; she was looking at the water of the crossing.

"Vickers said it was," the driver replied. "He ought to know." His tone was irritable.

"He's her brother, I reckon," reflected the man on the mesa; "no lover would talk that way to his girl." There was relief in his voice, for he had been hoping that the man was a brother.

"Vickers said to swing sharply to the left after passing the middle," declared the driver sonorously, "but I don't see any wagon tracks — that miserable rain last night must have obliterated them."

"I reckon the rain has *obliterated* them," grinned the rider, laboring with the word, "if that means wipin' them out. Leastways, they ain't there any more."

"I feel quite sure that Mr. Vickers said to turn to the right after passing the middle, Willard," came the girl's voice.

"I certainly ought to be able to remember that, Ruth!" said the driver, gruffly. "I heard him distinctly!"

"Well," returned the girl with a nervous little laugh, "perhaps I was mistaken, after all." She

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placed a hand lightly on the driver's arm. And the words she spoke then were not audible to the rider, so softly were they uttered. And the driver laughed with satisfaction. "You've said it!" he declared. "I'm certainly able to pilot this ship to safety!" He pulled on the reins and spoke sharply to the blacks. They responded with a jerk that threw the occupants of the buckboard against the backs of the seats.

The rider's eyes gleamed. "Hush!" he said, addressing no one in particular. "Calamity's goin' to claim another victim!" He raised one hand to his lips, making a funnel of it. He was about to shout at the driver, but thought better of the idea and let the hand drop. "Shucks," he said, "I reckon there ain't any real danger. But I expect the boss gasser of the outfit will be gettin' his'n pretty quick now." He leaned forward and watched the buckboard, his lean under jaw thrown forward, a grim smile on his lips. He noted with satisfaction that the elderly couple in the rear seat, and the girl in the front one, were holding on tightly, and that the driver, busy with the reins, was swaying from one side to the other as the wagon bumped over the impeding stones of the river bed.

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The blacks reached the middle of the stream safely and were crowding of their own accord to the right, when the driver threw his weight on the left rein and swung them sharply in that direction. For a few feet they traveled evenly enough but when they were still some distance from the bank, the horse on the left sank quickly to his shoulders, lunged, stood on his hind legs and pawed the air impotently, and then settled back, snorting and trembling.

Too late the driver saw his error. As the left horse sank he threw his weight on the right rein as though to remedy the accident. This movement threw him off his balance, and he slipped off the seat, clawing and scrambling; at the instant the front of the buckboard dipped and sank, disappearing with a splash into the muddy water. It had gone down awry, the girl's side high out of the water, the girl herself clinging to the edge of the seat, out of the water's reach, the elderly couple in the rear also safe and dry, but plainly frightened.

The girl did not scream; the rider on the mesa noted this with satisfaction. She was talking, though, to the driver, who at first had disappeared, only to reappear an instant later, blowing

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and cursing, his head and shoulders out of the water, his ridiculous hat floating serenely down stream, the reins still in his hands.

"I reckon he's discovered that Vickers told him to swing to the right," grinned the rider from his elevation. He watched the driver until he gained the bank and stood there, dripping, gesticulating, impotent rage consuming him. The buckboard could not be moved without endangering the comfort of the remaining occupants, and without assistance they must inevitably stay where they were. And so the rider on the mesa wheeled his pony and sent it toward the edge of the mesa where a gentle slope swept downward to the plains.

"I reckon I've sure got to rescue her," he said, grinning with some embarrassment, "though I'm mighty sorry that Willard had to get his new clothes wet."

He spoke coaxingly to the pony; it stepped gingerly over the edge of the mesa and began the descent, sending stones and sand helter-skelter before it, the rider sitting tall and loose in the saddle, the reins hanging, he trusting entirely to the pony's wisdom.

CHAPTER II

THE SYMPATHETIC RESCUER

HALF-WAY down the slope, the rider turned and saw that Willard and the occupants of the buckboard were watching him. The color in his cheeks grew deeper and his embarrassment increased, for he noted that the girl had faced squarely around toward him, had forgotten her precarious position; her hands were clasped as though she were praying for his safety. The aunt and uncle, too, were twisted in their seat, leaning toward him in rigid attitudes, and Willard, safe on his bank, was standing with clenched hands.

“Do you reckon we’re goin’ to break our necks, you piebald outlaw,” the rider said to the pony. “Well,” as the animal whinnied gently at the sound of his voice, “there’s some people that do, an’ if you’ve got any respect for them you’ll be mighty careful.”

The descent was accomplished in a brief time, and then Patches and his rider went forward

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toward the mired buckboard and its occupants, the pony unconcernedly, its rider, having conquered his embarrassment, serene, steady of eye, inwardly amused.

When he reached the water's edge he halted Patches. Sitting motionless in the saddle, he quietly contemplated the occupants of the buckboard. He had come to help them, but he was not going to proffer his services until he was sure they would be welcomed. He had heard stories of the snobbishness and independence of some Easterners.

And so he sat there long, for the occupants of the buckboard, knowing nothing of his intentions, were in their turn awaiting some word from him.

No word came. He looked down, interestedly watching Patches drink. Then, when the pony had finished, he looked up, straight at the girl. She was sitting very erect — as erect as she could in the circumstances, trying hard to repress her anger over his inaction. She could see that he was deliberately delaying. And she met his gaze coldly.

He looked from the girl to Willard. The Easterner was examining a small pistol that he had drawn from a yellow holster at his waist, so

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high on his waist that he had been compelled to bend his elbow in an acute angle to get it out. His hands were trembling, whether from the wetting he had received or from doubt as to the rider's intentions, was a question that the rider did not bother with. He looked again at the girl. Doubt had come into her eyes; she was looking half fearfully at him, and he saw that she half suspected him of being a desperado, intent on doing harm. He grinned, moved to mirth.

She was reassured; that smile had done it. She returned it, a little ruefully. And she felt that, in view of the circumstances, she might dispense with formalities and get right down to business. For her seat was uncomfortable, and Aunt Martha and Uncle Jepson were anxious, to say nothing of Willard, who had placed his pistol behind him, determined, if the man turned out to be a highwayman, to defend his party to the last.

But still the rider did not move. There was no hurry; only Willard seemed to be really suffering, for the winter's chill had not yet gone out of the air. But then, Willard had earned his ducking.

The girl cleared her throat. "We have had

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an accident," she informed the rider, her voice a little husky.

At this word he swept his hat from his head and bowed to her. "Why, I reckon you have, ma'am," he said. "Didn't you have no driver?"

"Why, yes," returned the girl hesitatingly, for she thought she detected sarcasm in his voice, and she had to look twice at him to make sure — and then she couldn't have told. "The gentleman on the bank, there, is our driver."

"The gentleman on the bank, eh?" drawled the rider. And now for the first time he seemed to become aware of Willard's presence, for he looked narrowly at him. "Why, he's all wet!" he exclaimed. "I expect he come pretty near drownin', didn't he, ma'am?" He looked again at the girl, astonishment in his eyes. "An' so he drove you into that suck-hole, an' he got throwed out! Wasn't there no one to tell him that Calamity ain't to be trusted?"

"Mr. Vickers told us to keep to the right after reaching the middle," said the girl.

"I distinctly understood him to say the left, Ruth," growled Willard.

The rider watched the girl's face, saw the color come into it, and his lips twitched with some

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inward emotion. "I reckon your brother's right, ma'am. Vickers wanted to drownd you-all."

"Mr. Masten isn't my brother," denied the girl. The color in her face heightened.

"Well, now," said the rider. He bent his head and patted the pony's mane to hide his disappointment. Again, so it seemed to the girl, he was deliberately delaying, and she bit her lips with vexation.

Willard also seemed to have the same thought, for he shouted angrily: "While you are talking there, my man, I am freezing. Isn't there some way for you to get my party and the wagon out of there?"

"Why, I expect there's a way," drawled the rider, fixing Masten with a steady eye; "I've been wonderin' why you didn't mention it before."

"Oh Lord!" said Masten to the girl, his disgust making his voice husky, "can you imagine such stupidity?"

But the girl did not answer; she had seen a glint in the rider's eyes while he had been looking at Masten which had made her draw a deep breath. She had seen guile in his eyes, and subtlety, and much humor. Stupidity! She wondered how Masten could be so dense!

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Then she became aware that the rider was splashing toward her, and the next instant she was looking straight at him, with not more than five feet of space between them. His gaze was on her with frank curiosity, his lean, strong face glowing with the bloom of health; his mouth was firm, his eyes serene, virility and confidence in every movement of his body. And then he was speaking to her, his voice low, gentle, respectful, even deferential. He seemed not to have taken offense at Willard, seemed to have forgotten him.

"I reckon you-all will have to ride out of here on my horse, ma'am," he said, "if you reckon you'd care to. Why, yes, I expect that's right; I'd ought to take the old lady an' gentleman first, ma'am," as the girl indicated them.

He backed his pony and smiled at Aunt Martha, who was small, gray, and sweet of face. He grinned at her — the grin of a grown boy at his grandmother.

"I reckon you'll go first, Aunty," he said to her. "I'll have you high an' dry in a jiffy. You couldn't ride there, you know," he added, as Aunt Martha essayed to climb on behind him. "This Patches of mine is considerable cantankerous an' ain't been educated to it. It's likely he'd

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dump us both, an' then we'd be freezin' too." And he glanced sidelong at Willard.

Aunt Martha was directed to step on the edge of the buckboard. Trembling a little, though smiling, she was lifted bodily and placed sidewise on the saddle in front of him, and in this manner was carried to the bank, far up on the slope out of the deep mud that spread over the level near the water's edge, and set down gently, voicing her thanks.

Then the rescuer returned for Uncle Jepson. On his way to join Aunt Martha, Uncle Jepson, who had watched the rider narrowly during his talk with Willard, found time to whisper:

"I had a mule once that wasn't any stubbornner than Willard Masten."

"You don't recollect how you cured him of it?"

"Yes sir, I do. I thumped it out of him!" And Uncle Jepson's eyes glowed vindictively.

"I reckon you've got a heap of man in you, sir," said the rider. He set Uncle Jepson down beside Aunt Martha and turned his pony back toward the river to get his remaining passenger. Masten waved authoritatively to him.

"If it's just the same to you, my man, I'll assist Miss Ruth to land. Just ride over here!"

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The rider halted the pony and sat loosely in the saddle, gravely contemplating the driver across the sea of mud that separated them.

"Why, you ain't froze yet, are you!" he said in pretended astonishment. "Your mouth is still able to work considerable smooth! An' so you want to ride my horse!" He sat, regarding the Easterner in deep, feigned amazement. "Why, Willard," he said when it seemed he had quite recovered, "Patches would sure go to sun-fishin' an' dump you off into that little ol' suck-hole ag'in!" He urged the pony on through the water to the buckboard and drew up beside the girl.

Her face was crimson, for she had not failed to hear Masten, and it was plain to the rider that she had divined that jealousy had impelled Masten to insist on the change of riders. Feminine perverseness, or something stronger, was in her eyes when the rider caught a glimpse of them as he brought his pony to a halt beside her. He might now have made the mistake of referring to Masten and thus have brought from her a quick refusal to accompany him, for he had made his excuse to Masten and to have permitted her to know the real reason would have been to attack

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her loyalty. He strongly suspected that she was determined to make Masten suffer for his obstinacy, and he rejoiced in her spirit.

"We're ready for you now, ma'am."

"Are you positively certain that Patches won't go to 'sunfishing' with me?" she demanded, as she poised herself on the edge of the buckboard.

He flashed a pleased grin at her, noting with a quickening pulse the deep, rich color in her cheeks, the soft white skin, her dancing eyes — all framed in the hood of the rain cloak she wore.

He reached out his hands to her, clasped her around the waist and swung her to the place on the saddle formerly occupied by Aunt Martha. If he held her to him a little more tightly than he had held Aunt Martha the wind might have been to blame, for it was blowing some stray wisps of her hair into his face and he felt a strange intoxication that he could scarcely control.

And now, when she was safe on his horse and there was no further danger that she would refuse to ride with him, he gave her the answer to her question:

"Patches wouldn't be unpolite to a lady, ma'am," he said quietly, into her hair; "he wouldn't throw you."

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He could not see her face — it was too close to him and his chin was higher than the top of her head. But he could not fail to catch the mirth in her voice:

“Then you lied to Willard!”

“Why, yes, ma’am; I reckon I did. You see, I didn’t want to let Patches get all muddied up, ridin’ over to Willard.”

“But you are riding him into the mud now!” she declared in a strangely muffled voice.

“Why, so I am, ma’am,” he said gleefully; “I reckon I’m sure a box-head!”

He handed her down a minute later, beside Uncle Jepson and Aunt Martha, and he lingered another moment near her, for his proximity to her had set his blood tingling, and there was an unnamable yearning in his breast to be near her. He had passed hours in looking upon her picture, dreaming of this minute, or another like it, and now that his dream had come true he realized that fulfilment was sweeter than anticipation. He was hugely pleased with her.

“She’s a lot better lookin’ than her picture,” he told himself as he watched her. She had her back to him, talking with her relatives, but she did not need to face him to arouse his worship. “Didn’t

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I know she was little," he charged himself, estimating her height, "she won't come anywhere near reachin' my shoulder."

He had not forgotten Masten. And a humorous devil sported in his eye as he wheeled his pony and fixed his gaze on that gentleman.

"Speciments travel around most anywheres," he reflected. "This here's a swell head with a grouch. I reckon he ain't a serious friend of hers, or she wouldn't have stood for me rescuin' her when he offered himself that generous." The recollection convulsed him, and he bowed his head over the pony's neck to hide the laugh. When he looked up, it was to see Masten standing rigid, watching him, wrath on his face.

"I suppose I'm to stand here and freeze while you sit over there and laugh your fool head off!" shouted the Easterner. "I've got some dry clothing in my trunk on the wagon, which I might put on, if I could induce you to hurry a little."

"Why, shucks. I come mighty near forgettin' you, Willard," said the rider. "An' so you've got other clothes! Only they're in your trunk on the buckboard, an' you can't get 'em. An' you're freezin' an' I'm laughin' at you. You've got a heap of trouble, ain't you, Willard. An' all

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because you was dead set on goin' to the left when you ought to have gone to the right."

"Do hurry! Wont you, please?" said the girl's voice, close to his stirrup.

He looked guiltily at her, for he had been about to say some vitriolic things to Masten, having almost lost patience with him. But at her words his slow good nature returned.

"I'm sure goin' to hurry, ma'am."

He urged the pony into the water again, rode to the buckboard, stepped off, and kneeling in the seat reached into the water and worked with the harness. Then, walking along the wagon tongue, which was slightly out of the water, he again reached into the water and fumbled with the harness. Then he stepped back, slapped the blacks and urged them with his voice, and they floundered out of the water and gained the bank, where they stood shaking the water from their glistening bodies.

He mounted his pony again and rode to the rear of the buckboard. Taking the braided hair rope that hung from the pommel of his saddle he made a hitch around the center of the rear axle. Then he wheeled his pony until it faced away from the buckboard, rode the length of the rope

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carefully, halted when it was taut, and then slowly, with his end of the rope fastened securely to the saddle horn, pulled the buckboard to a level on the river bottom.

Returning to the rear of the buckboard he unfastened the rope, coiled it, and rode to the bank, catching the blacks and leading them up the slope beyond where the girl, her aunt and uncle stood. He gently asked Uncle Jepson to hold the blacks, for fear they might stray, and then with a smile at the girl and Aunt Martha, he returned to the buckboard. There he uncoiled his rope again and attached one end of it to the tongue of the wagon, again, as before, riding away until the rope grew taut. Then, with a word to the pony, the wagon was drawn through the water to the edge of the sea of mud.

This mud looked treacherous, but it was the only way out; and so, after a pause for rest, he urged the pony on again. The buckboard traveled its length — then lurched into a rut and refused to move another foot, in spite of the straining of the pony and its rider's urgings.

The rider paused, turned in the saddle and scratched his head in perplexity.

"I reckon we've run ag'in a snag, Patches," he

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said. He scrutinized the slopes. "I expect we'll have to try one of them, after all," he decided.

"You were foolish to try to draw the wagon out with that thing, in the first place," loudly criticized Masten. "If you had hitched the horses to the wagon after you had pulled it out of the hole, why —"

The rider looked at the fault-finder, his eyes narrowed.

"Why, if it ain't Willard!" he said, amazed. "Standin' there, workin' his little old jaw ag'in! An' a-mournin' because I ain't goin' to get my feet wet! Well, shucks. I reckon there ain't nothin' to do now but to get the blacks an' hitch 'em onto the wagon. There's a heap of mud there, of course, but I expect some mud on them right pretty boots of yours wouldn't spoil 'em. I'll lead the blacks over an' you can work your jaw on 'em."

"Thanks," said Masten, sneering, "I've had enough wettings for one day. I have no doubt that you can get the wagon out, by your own crude methods. I shall not interfere, you may be sure."

He stalked away from the water's edge and ascended the slope to a point several feet in advance of the wagon. Standing there, he looked

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across the mud at the girl and the others, as though disdaining to exchange further words with the rider.

The latter gazed at him, sidelong, with humorous malice in his glance. Then he wheeled his pony, rode back toward the wagon, veered when almost to it and forced the pony to climb the slope, thus getting Masten between the rope and the mud. He pulled the rope taut again, swinging wagon tongue and wheels at a sharp angle toward him, drove the spurs into the flanks of the pony and headed it toward the mud level, swinging so that the rope described a quarter circle. It was a time-honored expedient which, he expected, would produce the jerk releasing the wagon.

If he expected the action would produce other results, the rider gave no indication of it. Only the girl, watching him closely and seeing a hard gleam in his eyes, sensed that he was determined to achieve a double result, and she cried out to Masten. The warning came too late. The taut rope, making its wide swing, struck Masten in the small of the back, lifted him, and bore him resistlessly out into the mud level, where he landed, face down, while the wagon, released, swished past him on its way to freedom.

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The rider took the wagon far up the sloping trail before he brought it to a halt. Then, swinging it sideways so that it would not roll back into the mud, he turned and looked back at Masten. The latter had got to his feet, mud-bespattered, furious.

The rider looked from Masten to the girl, his expression one of hypocritical gravity. The girl's face was flushed with indignation over the affront offered her friend. She had punished him for his jealousy, she had taken her part in mildly ridiculing him. But it was plain to the rider when he turned and saw her face, that she resented the indignity she had just witnessed. She was rigid; her hands were clenched, her arms stiff at her sides; her voice was icy, even, though husky with suppressed passion.

"I suppose I must thank you for getting the wagon out," she said. "But that — that despicable trick —" Her self-control deserted her. "I wish I were a man; you would not go unpunished!"

There was contrition in his eyes. For an infinitesimal space he regretted the deed, and his active mind was already framing an excuse. And then out of the tail of his eye he saw Uncle Jepson

winking violent applause at him, and a broad grin suffused his face. He made some effort to suppress it, but deepening wrinkles around his eyes contradicted the gravity of his lips.

"Why, I wasn't reckonin' to hurt him, ma'am," he said. "You see, he was right in the way, an' I reckon I was feelin' a bit wild right at that minute, an'—" His gaze went to Masten, who was scraping mud from his garments with a small flat stone. The rider's eyes grew wide; more wrinkles appeared around them.

"Why, I've spoiled his white shirt," he said as though speaking to himself, his voice freighted with awe. And then, as Masten shook a threatening fist at him, he suddenly yielded to the mirth that was consuming him and he bowed his head.

It was Uncle Jepson's warning shout that impelled him to raise his head. He saw Masten coming toward him, clawing at the foolish holster at his waist, his eyes flashing murder, his teeth bared in a snarl.

"You, Patches!" said the rider, his voice coming with a cold, quick snap. And the piebald pony, his muscles and thews alive with energy in an instant, lunged in answer to the quick knee-press, through the mud, straight at Masten.

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So it was a grim and formidable figure that Masten looked up at before he could get his weapon out of his holster. The lean face of the rider was close to his own, the rider's eyes were steady, blue, and so cold that they made Masten forget the chill in the air. And one of the heavy pistols that the rider carried was close to Masten's head, its big muzzle gaping forebodingly at him, and the rider's voice, as he leaned from the saddle, came tense and low. The girl could not hear:

"Listen to this gospel, you mud-wallowin' swine," he said. "This is a man's country, an' you play a man's game or you lose out so quick it'll make you dizzy! You been playin' kid all through this deal. You're grumblin' an' whinin' ever since I set eyes on you from the edge of the mesa, there. That little girl thinks you're all wool an' a yard wide. You come across, clean — you hear me! You shape up to man's size or I'll hunt you up an' tear the gizzard out of you! You jam that there cap-shooter back where it belongs or I'll take it away from you an' make you eat it! You hear me!"

The pistol went back; Masten's face was ashen beneath the mud on it.

"Now grin, you sufferin' shorthorn!" came

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the rider's voice again, low as before. "Grin like you'd just discovered that I'm your rich uncle come from Frisco with a platter full of gold nuggets which I'm set on you spendin' for white shirts. Grin, or I'll salivate you!"

It was a grin that wreathed Masten's lips — a shallow, forced one. But it sufficed for the rider. He sat erect, his six-shooter disappearing magically, and the smile on his face when he looked at the girl, had genuine mirth in it.

"I've apologized to Willard, ma'am," he said. "We ain't goin' to be cross to each other no more. I reckon you c'n forgive me, now, ma'am. I sure didn't think of bein' mean."

The girl looked doubtfully at Masten, but because of the mud on his face could see no expression.

"Well, I'm glad of that," she said, reddening with embarrassment. "I certainly would not like to think that anyone who had been so accommodating as you could be so mean as to deliberately upset anyone in the mud." She looked downward. "I'm sorry I spoke to you as I did," she added.

"Why, I'm sorry too, ma'am," he said gravely. He urged his pony through the mud and brought

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it to a halt beside her. "If you'd shake hands on that, ma'am, I'd be mighty tickled."

Her hand went out to him. He took it and pressed it warmly, looking at it, marveling at it, for the glove on it could not conceal its shapeliness or its smallness. He dropped it presently, and taking off his hat, bowed to her.

"Thank you, ma'am," he said; "I'll be seein' you ag'in some time. I hope you'll like it here."

"I am sure I shall."

He grinned and turned away. Her voice halted him.

"May I know who has been so kind to us in our trouble?"

He reddened to the roots of his hair, but faced her.

"Why, I reckon you'll know, ma'am. I'm King Randerson, foreman of the Diamond H, up the crick a ways. That is," he added, his blush deepening, "I was christened 'King.' But a while ago a dago professor who stayed overnight at the Diamond H tipped the boys off that 'King' was Rex in Latin lingo. An' so it's been Rex Randerson since then, though mostly they write it '*W-r-e-c-k-s*.' There's no accountin' for notions hereabouts, ma'am."

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"Well, I should think not!" said the lady, making mental note of the blueness of his eyes. "But I am sure the boys make a mistake in spelling your name. Judging from your recent actions it should be spelled '*R-e-c-k-l-e-s-s.*' Anyway, we thank you."

"The same to you, ma'am. So long."

He flashed a smile at Aunt Martha; it broadened as he met Uncle Jepson's eyes; it turned to a grin of derision as he looked at Masten. And then he was splashing his pony across the river.

They watched him as he rode up the slope on the opposite side; they held their breath as pony and rider climbed the steeper slope to the mesa. They saw him halt when he reached the mesa, saw him wave his hat to them. But they did not see him halt the pony after he had ridden a little way, and kiss the palm of the hand that had held hers.

CHAPTER III

AT THE FLYING W

IT fell to Uncle Jepson to hitch the blacks to the buckboard — in a frigid silence Masten had found his trunk, opened it and drawn out some very necessary dry clothing; then marching behind a thick clump of alder, he proceeded to make the change. After this he climbed down to the river and washed the mud from visible portions of his body. Then he returned to the buckboard, to find the others waiting for him. In a strained silence he climbed up to the seat beside Ruth, took up the reins, and sent the blacks forward.

It was ten miles to the Flying W ranchhouse, and during the ride the silence was broken only once. That was when, at about the fifth mile, Ruth placed a hand on Masten's arm and smiled at him.

"I really think Mr. Randerson *was* sorry that he upset you in the mud, Willard," she said gently. "I don't think he did it to be mean. And it was

so manly of him to apologize to you." She laughed, thinking that time had already removed the sting. "And you really *did* look funny, Willard, with the mud all over you. I—I could have laughed, myself, if I hadn't felt so indignant."

"I'll thank you to not refer to it again, Ruth," he said crossly.

She flushed and looked straight ahead of her at the unfolding vistas that their passage revealed: at the undulating plains, green with bunchgrass that the rain of the night before had washed and reinvigorated; into gullies where weeds grew thick; peering into arroyos—visible memories of washouts and cloudbursts; glimpsing barrancas as they flashed by; wondering at the depth of draws through which the trail led; shivering at the cacti—a brilliant green after the rain—for somehow they seemed to symbolize the spirit of the country—they looked so grim, hardy, and mysterious with their ugly thorns that seemed to threaten and mock. She shrank, too, when the buckboard passed the skeleton of a steer, its bleached bones ghastly in the sunlight, but she smiled when she saw a sea of soap-weed with yellow blossoms already unfolding, and she

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looked long at a mile-wide section of mesquite, dark and inviting in the distance. She saw a rattler cross the trail in front of the buckboard and draw its loathsome length into a coil at the base of some crabbed yucca, and thereafter she made grimaces at each of the ugly plants they passed. It was new to her, and wonderful. Everything, weird or ugly, possessed a strange fascination for her, and when they lurched over the crest of a hill and she saw, looming somberly in the distance in front of her, a great cottonwood grove, with some mountains behind it, their peaks gleaming in the shimmering sunlight, thrusting above some fleecy white clouds against a background of deep-blue sky, her eyes glistened and she sat very erect, thrilled. It was in such a country that she had longed to live all the days of her life.

Somehow, it gave her a different viewpoint. The man who had accommodated them back at the river seemed to fit very well here. The spirit of the young, unfettered country was in his eyes, in his serene manner; he was as hardy and rugged as this land from which he had sprung.

When the buckboard came to a halt in the Flying W ranchhouse yard, Ruth Harkness' first

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emotion was one of a great happiness that the Harknesses had always been thrifty and neat, and also that Uncle William had persisted in these habits. She had greatly feared, for during the last day of her ride on the train she had passed many ranchhouses and she had been appalled and depressed by the dilapidated appearance of their exteriors, and by the general atmosphere of disorder and shiftlessness that seemed to surround them. So many of them had reminded her of the dwelling places of careless farmers on her own familiar countryside, and she had assured herself that if the Flying W were anything like those others she would immediately try to find a buyer, much as she wished to stay.

But the first glance at the Flying W convinced her that her fears had been groundless. The ranchhouse was a big two-story structure built of heavy timber, with porches in front and rear, and wide cornices, all painted white and set on a solid foundation of stone. It looked spacious and comfortable. The other buildings — stables, bunkhouse, messhouse, blacksmith shop, and several others — did not discredit the ranchhouse. They all were in good repair. She had already

noted that the fences were well kept; she had seen chickens and pigs, flowers and a small garden; and behind the stable, in an enclosure of barbed wire, she had observed some cows — milkers, she was certain.

The ranchhouse was well sheltered by timber. The great cottonwood grove that she had seen from the plains was close to the house on the south; it extended east and west for perhaps half a mile, and a grove of firs rose to the north, back of the pasture fence. The general character of the land surrounding the house was a sort of rolling level. The foothills belonging to the mountains that she had seen while approaching the ranchhouse were behind the cottonwood grove. She had seen, too, that the river they had crossed at the ford which Wes Vickers had called "Calamity" was not more than a mile from the house, and therefore she concluded that it doubled widely. Later, she learned from Vickers that her conclusion was correct, and that the river was called "Rabbit Ear." Why it was called that she was never able to discover.

When the buckboard came to a halt, two men who had been seated in the doorway of one of the buildings — she discovered, later, that it was

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the bunkhouse — got up, lazily, and approached the buckboard. Ruth felt a pulse of trepidation as they sauntered close to the wagon. Vickers had told her nothing directly concerning the character of the men at the ranch, but during their conversation at Red Rock that morning he had mentioned that the “boys are a good lot, taken together, but they’s some that don’t measure up.” And she wondered whether these two came under that final vague, though significant classification.

Their appearance was against them. The one in advance, a man of medium height, looked positively villainous with his long, drooping black mustache and heavy-thatched eyebrows. He eyed the occupants of the buckboard with an insolent half-smile, which the girl thought he tried — in vain — to make welcoming.

The other was a man of about thirty; tall, slender, lithe, swarthy, with thin, expressive lips that were twisted upward at one corner in an insincere smirk. This taller man came close to the wagon and paused in an attitude of quiet impudence.

“I reckon you’re Ruth Harkness — the ol’ man’s niece?” he said.

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"Yes," returned the girl, smiling. Perhaps she had misjudged these men.

"Well," said the man, looking at her with a bold glance that made her pulse skip a beat, "you're a stunner for looks, anyway." He reached out his hand. She took it, feeling that it was the proper thing to do, although with the action she heard a grumble from Masten.

"You're welcome to the Flyin' W," said the man, breaking an awkward silence. "Tom Chavis is special glad to see a pretty woman around these parts."

She felt, in his eyes more than his words, a veiled significance. She reddened a little, but met his gaze fairly, her eyes unwavering.

"Who is Tom Chavis?" she asked.

"I'm reckonin' to be Tom Chavis," he said, studying her. He waved a hand toward the other man, not looking at him. "This is my friend Jim Pickett. We was foreman an' straw boss, respective, under Bill Harkness."

She could not help wishing that her uncle had discharged the two men before his death. She was wondering a little at Masten's silence; it seemed to her that he must see her embarrassment, and that he might relieve her of the burden

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of this conversation. She looked quickly at him; he appeared to be unconcernedly inspecting the ranchhouse. Perhaps, after all, there was nothing wrong with these men. Certainly, being a man himself, Masten should be able to tell.

And so she felt a little more at ease.

"I'm glad to meet you, Mr. Chavis," she said. "Your friend Mr. Pickett too." She indicated Masten with a nod of her head toward him. "This is Mr. Willard Masten, a very dear friend of mine." The color in her face deepened with the words.

Chavis had looked twice at Masten before Ruth spoke. He looked again now, meeting the Easterner's eyes. Chavis had been ready to sneer at Masten because of his garments — they were duplicates of those he had worn before the ducking, and quite as immaculate — but something in the Easterner's eyes kept the sneer back; his own eyes gleamed with a quick, comprehensive fire, and he smiled. In the buckboard, fresh from that civilization which Chavis was ready to scorn, he had recognized a kindred spirit. There was exultation in his voice when he spoke, and he reached over Ruth to grasp Masten's hand.

"An' so this is Willard, a very dear friend of

yourn, eh? Well, now, I'm sure glad, an' I reckon him an' me will get on." He urged Pickett forward and introduced him, and Pickett gave Masten one quick, appraising glance. Then he, too, grinned.

Ruth was gratified. These men were rough, but they had been quick to recognize and appreciate Masten's good qualities. They had gone more than half way in welcoming him. Of course, there was Chavis' bold allusion to a "pretty woman," but the very uncouthness of the men must be the explanation for that breach of etiquette. She was much relieved.

Masten was suave and solicitous. He jumped out of the buckboard and helped her down, performing a like service for Aunt Martha. Uncle Jepson got out himself. Then, as Ruth hesitated an instant, Masten bent over her.

"You must be tired, dear. Go in and explore the house. Get some refreshment and take a rest. I'll attend to the baggage and the horses."

He gave her a gentle pressure of the hand, and, followed by Uncle Jepson and Aunt Martha, she went indoors.

CHAPTER IV

A MEMORY OF THE RIDER

A QUIET satisfaction shone from Ruth's eyes when, accompanied by Aunt Martha and Uncle Jepson, she completed her inspection of the ranchhouse.

"It isn't all that could be desired," she told Aunt Martha, "but it is better than I expected."

"It's comfortable, dearie," mildly smiled Aunt Martha.

"An' big enough for a feller to stretch his legs in," added Uncle Jepson. He was sitting in a big chair at one of the front windows of the sitting-room, having already adjusted himself to his new surroundings, and was smoking a short briar pipe and looking out of the window at the bunkhouse, in front of which stood Pickett, Chavis, and Masten, talking and laughing.

While Ruth and her relatives had been inspecting one of the upstairs rooms, she had heard the men bringing the baggage in, had heard them clumping up the stairs and setting the trunks

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down. Then they went out, and a little later, peering from one of the windows upstairs, Ruth had seen Masten and the other two walking toward the stable. They were talking pleasantly; their liking for each other seemed to be mutual. Ruth was delighted, but Uncle Jepson had frowned several times when looking at them.

"I cal'late them two critters'll bear a heap of watchin'," he said now. "They don't look honest."

"Jep," said Aunt Martha before Ruth could speak, "you're always criticising folks."

"It's in their faces, drat 'em," insisted Uncle Jepson. He turned a vindictive eye on his niece. "If I'd have been fifty year younger I'd have give that Chavis a durn good thrashin' for sayin' what he did to you about pretty gals. Durn his hide, anyhow! That there Wil —"

"I felt that way myself, at first," smiled Ruth. "Afterwards, though, I felt differently. I suppose they were glad to see the new owner. Perhaps they haven't seen a lady in a long time."

"There's ways of showin' gladness," contended Uncle Jepson. "I cal'late if I wanted to compliment a girl, I wouldn't look at her like I wanted to carry her off to the mountains."

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"Jep, they're only cowboys — they don't know any different," remonstrated Aunt Martha.

"They don't, eh?" sniffed Uncle Jepson. "I cal'late that feller, Rex Randerson, is some different, ain't he? There's a gentleman, Ruth. You didn't see him makin' no ox-eyes. An' I'll bet you wouldn't ketch him gettin' thick with them two plug-uglies out there!"

Ruth turned away, smiling tolerantly, after having caught a glimpse of Aunt Martha's brows, uplifted in resignation. She was as fully aware of Uncle Jepson's dislike of Willard Masten as she was of Uncle Jepson's testiness and of his habit of speaking his thoughts without reservation.

Also, she had always avoided opposing him. It did not seem to be worth while. He had been left destitute, except for the little farm back near Poughkeepsie which he had sold at her request to accompany her here, and she felt that habits of thought and speech are firmly fixed at sixty-nine, and argument cannot shake them.

That first day at the ranchhouse was the beginning of a new existence for Ruth. Bound for years by the narrow restrictions and conventionality of the Poughkeepsie countryside, she found the spaciousness and newness of this life

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inviting and satisfying. Here there seemed to be no limit, either to the space or to the flights that one's soul might take, and in the solemn grandeur of the open she felt the omnipotence of God and the spell of nature.

She had plenty of time after the first day to hold communion with the Creator. Masten was rarely near her. His acquaintance with Pickett and Chavis seemed destined to develop into friendship. He rode much with them — "looking over the range," he told her — and only in the evening did he find time to devote to her.

Wes Vickers returned from Red Rock on the morning following Ruth's arrival. Apparently, in spite of Randerson's prediction, Vickers did not get drunk in town. Through him Ruth learned much about the Flying W. He gave her the fruit of his experience, and he had been with the Flying W as range boss for nearly five years.

Vickers was forty. His hair was gray at the temples; he was slightly stoop-shouldered from years in the saddle, and his legs were bowed from the same cause. He was the driving force of the Flying W. Ruth's uncle had written her to that effect the year before during his illness,

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stating that without Vickers' help he would be compelled to sell the ranch. The truth of this statement dawned upon Ruth very soon after her acquaintance with Vickers. He was argus-eyed, omnipresent. It seemed that he never slept. Mornings when she would arise with the dawn she would find Vickers gone to visit some distant part of the range. She was seldom awake at night when he returned.

He had said little to her regarding the men. "They 'tend to business," was his invariable response when she sought to question him. "It's a pretty wild life," he told her when one day about two weeks after her coming she had pressed him; "an' the boys just can't help kickin' over the traces once in a while."

"Chavis and Pickett good men?" she asked.

"You saw anything to show you they ain't?" he said, with a queer look at her.

"Why, no," she returned. But her cheeks reddened.

He looked at her with a peculiar squint. "Seems like Masten runnin' with them shows that they ain't nothin' wrong with them," he said.

She had no reply to make to this, but she was vaguely disturbed over the expression in Vickers'

eyes; that look seemed to indicate that her own first impression of the two men, and Uncle Jepson's later condemnation of them, might be correct. However, they did not bother her, and she felt certain that Masten could care for himself.

With Masten absent with Chavis and Pickett nearly every day, Ruth had much time to herself. The river attracted her, and she rode to it many times, on a slant-eyed pony that Vickers had selected for her, and which had been gentled by a young cowpuncher brought in from an outlying camp solely for that purpose by the range boss. The young puncher had been reluctant to come, and he was equally reluctant to go.

"This here cayuse," he said to Vickers, when the latter instructed him to return to his outfit, saying that Miss Ruth thought she could now ride the pony without trouble, "is got a heap of devilment in him yet — which ought to come out."

"Miss Ruth's got a fellow," said the range boss, in seeming irrelevance. But the young puncher sneered a malignant denial and rode away to his camp.

There were fourteen other men employed by

the Flying W. Ruth met them at various times. Invariably they were looking for strays. They seemed—some of them—content to look at her; others, bolder, manufactured ingenuous pretexts to talk; but—all were gentlemen.

She arose one morning during the third week of her stay at the ranch, to be greeted by one of those perfect days that late spring brings. It had been dry for a week, with a hint of receding chill in the air, and the comfort of a wrap was still felt. But on this morning the sun was showing his power, and a balmy south breeze that entered her window was burdened with the aroma of sage, strong and delicious. She got out of bed and looked out of the window. It was a changed world. Summer had come overnight. No morning in the East had ever made her feel quite like this.

Out on the front porch later in the morning, with Chavis and Pickett standing near, she asked Masten to ride with her.

He seemed annoyed, but spoke persuasively.

“Put it off a day, won’t you, Ruth? There’s a good girl. I’ve promised to go to Lazette with the boys this morning, and I don’t want to disappoint them.” Then, seeing the disappointment in

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her eyes, he added: "Where did you want to ride?"

"Why," she said, hoping that, after all, he might change his mind, "I'm only going to the box canyon, down the river. There's such a pretty stretch of timber there."

He smiled indulgently. "I'll try to meet you there, this afternoon about three, if I can make it. But don't wait longer." He turned his back to her and presently went away with Chavis and Pickett.

She stood for a little time, watching them as they mounted down near the corral gate and rode away, and then she turned and observed Uncle Jepson standing near a corner of the house, smoking, and watching her. She forced a smile and went into the house.

A little after noon she saddled her pony and rode away toward the river. She had decided that perhaps Masten might keep his appointment in spite of the obvious insincerity that had been expressed on his face during their talk.

It was fully five miles to the grove at the head of the box canyon, and she made a leisurely ride of it, so that it must have been nearly two o'clock when she dismounted and hitched the pony to a

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tree. Seating herself on a flat rock near the canyon edge, she settled herself to wait.

It seemed a long time. Twice after half-past two she looked at her watch, impatiently. At three she looked again; and, disappointed, she was about to rise to go to her pony, when she heard the rapid drumming of hoofs near her.

With leaping heart and flushed face she turned her back to the direction from which the sounds seemed to come and waited listening, trying to appear unconcerned. She would make him believe she had not heard him. He did care, after all, enough to part with his companions — for her sake. She had misjudged him, and she was sincerely repentant. And when she heard his pony come to a halt near her she had to clench her hands to keep from turning to face him.

She heard him dismount, heard the rustle and crackling of twigs under his feet as he approached, and then, feeling that it would be futile to dissemble further, she turned, a smile on her lips.

Standing within five feet of her, grinning with amusement, was Tom Chavis. Curiously enough, despite her former fear of the man she did not fear him now, and after the first shock of surprise she looked at him composedly, for she half sus-

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pected that Masten had sent him, fearing that she *would* wait in spite of his admonition not to do so. She got up and faced Chavis.

"Mr. Masten couldn't come, I suppose?" she said.

"That's right," he said, looking at her oddly; "he couldn't come. You see, he's sort of taken a shine to a biscuit shooter in Crogan's, over in Lazette, an' he couldn't very well break away."

"A biscuit shooter!" she said, uncomprehendingly.

"Sure. I reckon that back East you'd call her a waitress, or somethin'. I ain't admirin' his taste none. She ain't nowheres near as good-lookin' as you."

Her first emotion was one of sickening, maddening jealousy. It made her physically weak, and she trembled as she fought it down. But the sensation passed and, though she felt that her face was hot and flushed, the cold calm of righteous resentment was slowly seizing her.

"Did Mr. Masten send you here to tell me this?" she asked icily.

"Why, no. I did it on my own hook. I knowed you'd be waitin' — I heard you makin' the date with Willard, this mornin'. An' I figgered

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that what was fair for one was fair for another. So I sneaked away from Willard an' come here. I've taken quite a shine to you, ma'am; you've sure got me some flustered. An' I reckon — " here he took a step toward her and grinned significantly " that I'll make a rattlin' good substitute for Willard."

She struck at him, blindly, savagely. She felt her open hand strike his cheek, heard him curse, and then, in a daze she was running toward her pony. She did not turn, but furiously raced the animal across the plains toward the ranchhouse.

She was calmer when she reached the house, but went directly to her room, where she changed her clothes and sat for a long time at one of the windows, looking toward the river — and toward Lazette.

Downstairs, Uncle Jepson, who from a window of the bunkhouse had seen her come in, had followed her into the house, to remark grumblingly to Aunt Martha:

" Willard didn't meet her, drat him! "

Ruth passed a miserable night, thinking over Chavis' words. The man might have been lying. Obviously, common fairness demanded that she tell Masten of the circumstance. On one thing

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she was determined: that Chavis should leave the ranch, whether he had lied to her or not. She would have instructed Vickers to attend to that, but Vickers had gone again to Red Rock on business, and would not return for two or three days. She would wait until Vickers returned to discharge Chavis, but she must tell Masten of the insult, for she yearned to see Chavis punished.

She waited until after breakfast the following morning, and then she induced Masten to walk with her, under pretext of examining the flower beds. Reaching them, she faced him fairly.

"Willard," she said, her lips white and stiff, "there must be no double-dealing between you and me. Tom Chavis told me yesterday that you are interested in a waitress in Lazette. Is that true?"

He started, flushed darkly, and then smiled blandly.

"Tom Chavis is romancing, my dear. If there is a waitress in Lazette I have not seen her." He seized her by the shoulders and spoke earnestly. "I am interested in Ruth Harkness, my dear. You surely don't believe such a story, do you, Ruth?"

He looked at her so frankly that her jealousy took wings, and she blushed and lowered her eyes.

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She raised them again, almost instantly, however; they were glowing vindictively.

"Tom Chavis came to the box canyon at three yesterday afternoon," she said firmly. "He insulted me. I want you to discharge him; Vickers is not here to do it. And I do not want to see him again."

He pressed his lips together and avoided her gaze, and a slow red stole into his face. Then he laughed mirthlessly.

"Tom Chavis is a valuable man here, Ruth," he said. "If the insult was one that can be overlooked, you would do well to let the matter rest. But be assured that I shall have a talk with Chavis, and you may believe that he will not repeat the offense." He patted her shoulder. "In the meantime," he said, with a hurt expression in his eyes, "do have some faith in me."

Reassured, convinced that she had done him an injustice in believing Chavis, she passed the remainder of the day in comparative light-heartedness. But when the awesome darkness of the West settled over the country, and deep, stirring thoughts came to her on her pillow, she found herself thinking of the rider of the river. He grew very vivid in her thoughts, and she found her-

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self wondering, — remembering the stern manliness of his face, — whether he, listening to the story of Chavis' insult from her lips, would have sought to find excuses for her insulter.

CHAPTER V

LOVE VS. BUSINESS

ON Sunday afternoon Ruth, Masten, Aunt Martha, and Uncle Jepson were sitting on the front porch of the Flying W ranch-house. Ruth was reading and thinking — thinking most of the time, the book lying open in her lap. Masten was smoking a cigar — one of the many that he had brought with him — and which he selfishly kept exclusively for his own use. Masten seemed to be doing a great deal of thinking, too, for he was silent during long periods, reclining easily in a big rocker, well-groomed and immaculate as usual, looking decidedly out of place in this country, where extravagant personal adornment was considered an indication of effeminacy.

Yet it was this immaculateness that had attracted Ruth to Masten in the first place when a year and a half before she had met him at a party in Poughkeepsie. Fresh from a big city near by, he had outshone the country gallants at the party as

he had outshone the cowboys that Ruth had seen since coming to the Flying W. His courtship had been gallant, too; he had quite captivated her, and after their engagement — which had been a rather matter-of-fact affair — she had not found it possible to refuse him permission to accompany her to the West.

“Have you visited your neighbor yet, Ruth?” Masten inquired at last.

“Neighbor!” Ruth showed astonishment by letting her book close and losing her place. “Why, I didn’t know we had a neighbor nearer than the Diamond H!”

Masten’s lips curled. Her reference to the Diamond H recalled unpleasant memories.

“A nester,” he said, and then added after a pause — “and his daughter. Only two miles from here, across the river. There’s a trail, through a break in the canyon, leading to their ranch on the other side of the river. The man’s name is Catherson — Abe Catherson. Chavis tells me he was something of a bother to your uncle, because of his propensity to steal Flying W cattle. He’s an old savage.”

“And the daughter?” inquired Ruth, her eyes alight with interest.

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"Half wild, bare-footed, ragged. She's pretty, though."

"How old is she, Willard?"

"A mere child. Fifteen, I should judge."

"I shall visit them tomorrow," declared Ruth.

"Sakes alive! Half wild? I should think she would be — living in that wilderness!" said Aunt Martha, looking up from her knitting, over the tops of her glasses.

"Everything is wild in this country," said Masten, a slight sneer in his voice. "The people are repulsive, in dress, manner, and speech." He delicately flicked some cigar ash from a coat sleeve.

Uncle Jepson wrinkled his nose belligerently. He sniffed in eloquent preparation for speech, but Aunt Martha averted the imminent clash by saying sharply:

"Jep, you hop in there and get that ball of yarn off the dining-room table!"

So potent is habit that Uncle Jepson started to obey automatically, Ruth interjected a word, speaking to Masten, and Uncle Jepson's opportunity was lost.

Silence reigned again until Ruth, who was facing the Calamity Trail, suddenly exclaimed:

“Some one is coming!”

During the silence she had again been thinking of Rex Randerson, and seeing the figure on the trail she had leaped to the conclusion that it was he. Her face had flushed. Masten noticed it, for he looked narrowly at her and, though he said nothing, there was that in his eyes which told he had divined what was in her mind.

It was not Randerson, however, but Vickers, who was coming. They all recognized him when he came closer, and they watched him with that peculiar concertedness which seizes upon an expectant company, until he dismounted at the corral gates and came toward them.

Plainly there was something on Vickers' mind, for he smiled mechanically as he stepped upon the porch and looked at them.

“Well, I'm back,” he said. He looked at Ruth. “There's somethin' I'd like to say to you. It's business. If you'd rather hear it private —”

“I think there is nothing —” she began.

“Well,” he said, “I've got to leave here.”

Ruth's face grew long. Uncle Jepson gagged on a mouthful of smoke. Aunt Martha ceased knitting. Masten alone seemed unmoved, but an elated gleam was in his eyes.

"Isn't that a rather sudden decision, Mr. Vickers?" questioned Ruth after a silence.

"Well, mebbe it is, to you," said Vickers, with some embarrassment. "But the fact is, I've been thinkin' of goin' for a long time — about a year to be exact. I was goin' before your uncle died, but I kept holdin' on because he wanted me to. You see, ma'am, I've got a mother back East. She's been poorly for quite a while now, an' has been wantin' me to come. I've been puttin' it off, but it's got to the point where it can't be put off any longer. I got a letter from her doctor the other day, an' he says that she can't last a heap longer. So — I'm goin'."

"That's too bad," sympathized Ruth. "You ought to go, and go quickly."

"I'm aimin' to, ma'am. But I've got to tell you somethin' before I go. Me an' your uncle was pretty thick; he trusted me a heap."

"Yes," said Ruth; "he told me that he liked and trusted you."

"Well, you'll understand then. A couple of months before he cashed in, we was talkin' of him goin'. He knowed it, ma'am. We was talkin' about the ranch. He knowed I wanted to leave. 'What'll I do for a range boss when you're

gone?' he asked me. 'I won't go till you ain't here any more,' I tells him. An' he grinned. 'I'm goin' to leave the Flyin' W to my niece, Ruth Harkness of Poughkeepsie,' he says. 'I'd like her to stay an' run it — if she likes it here. You'll be gone then, an' who in Sam Hill will be range boss then?' I told him I didn't have no thoughts on the subject, an' he continues: 'Rex Randerson, Vickers — he'll be range boss. Do you understand? If you was to pull your freight right now, Rex Randerson would be range boss as soon as I could get word over to him. An' if you've got any say-so after I'm gone, an' Ruth wants to keep the ranch, you tell her that — that Bill Harkness wants Rex Randerson to be range boss after Wes Vickers don't want it any more.' That's what he said, ma'am; them's his very words."

Ruth looked at Masten. He was staring stonily out into the plains. Ruth's cheeks reddened, for she felt that she knew his thoughts. But still, Randerson hadn't really used him ill at the river, and besides, he had apologized, and it seemed to her that that should end the incident. Also, she still felt rather resentful toward Masten for his attitude toward Tom Chavis after she had complained. And also, lurking deep in her unsophisti-

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cated mind was a most feminine impulse to sting Masten to jealousy. She looked up to meet Vickers' gaze, fixed curiously upon her.

"Could you recommend this man — Rander-son?" she asked.

"Why, ma'am, he's got the best reputation of any man in these parts!"

"But is he efficient?"

"Meanin' does he know his business? Well, I reckon. He's got the best head for range work of any man in the country! He's square, ma'am. An' there ain't no man monkeyin' with him. I've knowed him for five years, an' I ain't ever knowed him to do a crooked trick, exceptin' " — and here he scratched his head and grinned reminiscently — "when he gets the devil in him which he does occasionally, ma'am — an' goes to jokin', ma'am. But they're mostly harmless jokes, ma'am; he's never hurt nobody, bad. But he got a level head — a heap leveler than a lot of folks that — "

"I think Tom Chavis would make a good range boss, Ruth," said Masten. He did not look at her, and his words were expressionless.

"Mister man," said Vickers evenly, "what do you know about Tom Chavis?"

Masten looked quickly at Vickers, and as quickly looked away, his face slowly reddening.

"He's foreman now, isn't he?" he said. "It seems that Harkness trusted him that much."

"There's a first time for every man to go wrong, Mister," said Vickers.

Masten's voice was almost a sneer.

"Why don't you tell Chavis that?"

"I've told him, Mister — to his face." Vickers' own face was growing dark with wrath.

"You were range boss after Harkness' death," persisted Masten. "Why didn't you discharge Chavis?"

"I'm askin' the new boss for permission to do it now," declared Vickers. "It'll be a good wind-up for my stay here."

"We shall keep Chavis for the present," said Ruth. "However," she added firmly, "he shall not be range boss. I do not like him."

Vickers grinned silent applause. And again Uncle Jepson had trouble with his pipe. Aunt Martha worked her knitting needles a little faster. Masten's face paled, and the hand that held the cigar quickly clenched, so that smoking embers fell to the porch floor. Whatever his feelings, however, he retained his self-control.

"Of course, it is your affair, Ruth," he said. "I beg your pardon for offering the suggestion."

But he left them shortly afterward, lighting a fresh cigar and walking toward the bunkhouse, which was deserted, for Chavis and Pickett had gone to a distant part of the range.

Thus Masten did not see Vickers, when a little later he came out on the porch with his war-bag. He said good-bye to Aunt Martha and Uncle Jepson, and then he took Ruth's hand and held it long.

"You'll never go a heap wrong when you use your own judgment, girl," he said. "I'm ridin' over to the Diamond H to tell Randerson about his new job. Don't make no mistake, girl. Rex Randerson is square. An' if any trouble comes sneakin' around you, take it to Rex; he'll stick on the right side till hell freezes over."

CHAPTER VI

A MAN AND HIS JOB

JUST what Ruth's sensations were the next morning she could not have told. She could correctly analyze one emotion: it was eager anticipation. Also, she could account for it — she wanted to see Randerson. But her reason for wanting to see him was a mystery that she could not fathom, though between the time of arising and the moment when she got downstairs she devoted much thought to it. She knew she did not like Randerson well enough to wish to see him merely on that account — that was ridiculous, in spite of the vivid recollection of him that still lingered with her, for she had met him only once, and she assured herself that she was too practical-minded to fall in love with anyone at first sight. Yet by afternoon Ruth had tired of waiting; she had no special reason for certainty that Randerson would arrive that day, and so she went riding. She went alone, for Masten seemed to have hidden himself — at least, she could not find him.

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She rode to the break in the wall of the canyon that he had told her about, found it, sent her pony through it and over a shallow crossing, emerging at length in a tangle of undergrowth in a wood through which wound a narrow bridle path. She followed this for some distance, and after a while came to a clearing. A little adobe house stood near the center of the clearing. Ruth halted her pony, and was debating whether to call out or to ride boldly up, when a dog came out of the door of the cabin, growling, its hair bristling belligerently. The dog was big, black, and undoubtedly savage, for the pony instantly wheeled, and when the dog came closer, lashed out with both hind hoofs at it.

"Nig, you ol' duffer, git in hyeh where you b'long! Can't you see that that there's a *lady*!" came a voice, unmistakably feminine. And the dog, still growling, but submissive, drew off.

Ruth urged the pony on and rode the remaining distance to the door. A girl, attired in a ragged underskirt and equally ragged waist of some checkered material, and a faded house-apron that was many sizes too small for her, stood in the open doorway, watching. She was barefooted, her hair was in tumbling disorder, though Ruth could

tell that it had been combed recently. But the legs, bare almost to the knees, were clean, though brown from tan, and her face and arms glowed pink and spotless, in spite of the rags. In her eyes, as she watched Ruth, was a strange mixture of admiration and defiance.

"Dad ain't hyeh this mornin'," she volunteered as Ruth climbed off her pony.

"I came to see you," said Ruth, smiling. She threw the reins over the pony's head and advanced, holding out a hand. "I am Ruth Harkness," she added, "the new owner of the Flying W. I have been here almost a month, and I just heard that I had a neighbor. Wont you shake hands with me?"

"I reckon," said the girl. Reluctantly, it seemed, she allowed Ruth to take her hand. But she drew it away immediately. "I've heard of you," she said; "you're a niece of that ol' devil, Bill Harkness." She frowned. "He was always sayin' dad was hookin' his doggoned cattle. Dad didn't steal 'em — ol' Bill Harkness was a liar!" Her eyes glowed fiercely. "I reckon you'll be sayin' the same thing about dad."

"No indeed!" declared Ruth. "Your dad and I are going to be friends. I want to be friends

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with you, too. I am not going to charge your dad with stealing my cattle. We are going to be neighbors, and visit each other. I want to know your dad, and I want you to come over to the Flying W and get acquainted with my aunt and uncle. Aren't you going to invite me inside? I would if you came to visit me, you know." She smiled winningly.

The girl flushed, and cast a glance at the interior of the cabin, which, Ruth had already noted through the open door, was scantily furnished but clean. Then the girl led the way in, motioned Ruth to a chair near a rough-topped table, and stood over beside a cast-iron stove, her hands hanging at her sides, the fingers crumpling the cloth of the ragged apron. Her belligerence had departed; she seemed now to be beginning to realize that this visit was really meant to honor her, and she grew conscious of her rags, of the visible signs of poverty, of the visitor's raiment, gorgeous in comparison with her own — though Ruth's was merely a simple riding habit of brown corduroy.

Ruth had set out for this visit with a definite intention: she wanted to discover just how the girl and her father lived, and if conditions were

as she suspected she was determined to help them. Conditions were worse than she had expected, but her face gave no indication. Perhaps Ruth's wisdom was not remarkable where men were concerned, but she had a wealth of delicacy, understanding and sympathy where her own sex was in question. She stayed at the cabin for more than an hour and at the end of that time she emerged, smiling happily, her arm around the girl, with the girl's pledge to visit her soon and an earnest invitation to come again. Best of all, she had cleverly played upon the feminine instinct for fine raiment, slyly mentioned a trunk that she had brought with her from the East, packed to the top with substantial finery which was not in the least needed by her — an incumbrance, rather — and which, she hinted, might become the property of another, if suitable in size.

The girl followed her to the edge of the clearing, walking beside the pony. There they took leave of each other, a glow in the eyes of both that gave promise of future sincere friendship.

"Good-bye, Hagar," said the Flying W girl.

"Good-bye, lady," said the girl. "Ruth," she changed, as the Flying W girl held up an admonishing finger. And then, with a last smile, Ruth

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rode down the bridle path homeward, pleasure and pity mingling in her eyes.

Randerson reached the Flying W ranchhouse late in the afternoon. He rode first to the bunkhouse, and seeing nobody there he made a round of the buildings. Still seeing no one, he urged Patches toward the house, halted him at the edge of the front porch and sat in the saddle, looking at the front door. He was about to call, when the door opened and Uncle Jepson came out. There was a broad grin on Uncle Jepson's face.

"I cal'late you've got here," he said.

"Looks mighty like it," returned the horseman. "You reckon my new boss is anywheres around?"

"She's gone off ridin'," Uncle Jepson told him. "It's likely she'll be back shortly."

"I reckon I'd better wait," said Randerson. He wheeled Patches.

"There's plenty of sittin' room on the porch here," invited Uncle Jepson, indicating the chairs.

"Thank you — reckon the bunkhouse will be my quarters."

He spoke to the pony. Uncle Jepson spoke at the same instant, and Patches halted:

"I cal'late you'd better wait here."

"If you insist," said Randerson. He swung off and walked to the edge of the porch, grinning mildly at Uncle Jepson. The handclasp between them was warm, for Uncle Jepson had been strongly attracted to this son of the plains; and the twinkle in Randerson's eyes as his met Uncle Jepson's was not to be mistaken.

"So Vickers has gone," said Randerson as he dropped into a chair. "He's a mighty fine man."

"Willard wanted Chavis to have his job," whispered Uncle Jepson.

"You don't say!" Randerson's eyes gleamed. "An' Miss Ruth didn't want him, I reckon." He caught Uncle Jepson's nod. "She's allowin' that she's goin' to be boss. But of course she would," he added. He stood up, for Aunt Martha had opened the door and was standing in it, looking at him. He removed his hat and bowed to her, his eyes gleaming with something near affection, for Aunt Martha had found a place in his heart. He stepped forward, took her hand, and escorted her to the largest and most comfortable of the rockers on the porch, and when she sat down she looked up at him and smiled.

"I reckon you like it here?" he said gently to Aunt Martha.

" I like it very much. But there are differences — after Poughkeepsie. One doesn't notice them so much at first."

" I expect you find it sort of rough here," he said, looking at her. " They tell me that in the East folks live pretty close together — that there's conveniences. There ain't a heap of conveniences here." He pronounced the word slowly and laboriously. It was plain that he was trying to put on his best manners.

" No — no conveniences," said Aunt Martha. " But it's a wonderful country, my boy — wonderful! "

A pulse of something shot through him at the word, " boy."

" I'm glad you like it," he said gravely.

Aunt Martha folded her hands in her lap and looked long at him over the rims of her glasses. There was interest in her eyes, and kindliness. For she saw something in this figure of a new type that sat before her — something that the two big guns at his hips did not hint at — nor his leather chaps, the cartridge belt, the broad hat, the spurs, the high-heeled boots, the colored scarf at his throat. These things were the badges of his calling, and were, of course, indispensable, but she saw them

not. But the virile manhood of him; the indomitability; the quiet fearlessness, indicated by his steady, serene eyes; the rugged, sterling honesty that radiated from him, she saw—and admired. But above all she saw the boy in him—the generous impulses that lay behind his mask of grimness, the love of fun that she had seen him exhibit at Calamity.

“ You were born here? ” she asked.

“ In Colfax, ma’am.”

“ Is that a city? ”

“ Bless yu’, ma’am, no. It’s a county.”

“ And you were born on a ranch, then.”

“ Yes, ma’am.”

She was asking questions that a man would not have dared to ask him, and he was answering them as a boy might have answered. It did not seem an impertinence to him or to her, so great was her interest in him, so deep was his admiration of her.

“ And your parents? ”

“ Both dead, ma’am.” A shadow crossed his face, a look of wistfulness, and she abruptly ceased questioning. And when, a little later, they saw Ruth coming across the plains toward them, Aunt Martha got up. He held the screen door

open for her, and she paused on the threshold and patted his bare head.

"If I had had a son, I could have wished he would be like you," she said.

He blushed crimson. "Why, ma'am —" he began. But Aunt Martha had gone in, and he turned to face Ruth, who was dismounting at the edge of the porch.

"Oh!" she said, as though his appearance had surprised her, though she had seen him from afar, "you are here already!"

"I expect it's me, ma'am," he said gravely. "You see, Wes Vickers stopped at the Diamond H last evenin', an' I come right over."

It was quite evident that he would not attempt to be familiar. No longer was he the free lance rider of the plains who had been at liberty to exchange words with her as suited his whim; here was the man who had been given a job, and there stood his employer; he would not be likely to step over that line, and his manner showed it.

"Well," she said, "I am glad you decided to come right away; we miss Vickers already, and I have no doubt, according to his recommendation, that you will be able to fill his place acceptably."

"Thank you, ma'am. I reckon I'm to take up

my quarters in the bunkhouse?" He paused. "Or mebbe the foreman's shanty?"

"Why," she said, looking at him and noting his grave earnestness, so strikingly in contrast to his wild frolicsomeness at Calamity that day. "Why, I don't know about that. Vickers stayed at the ranchhouse, and I suppose you will stay here too."

"All right, ma'am; I'll be takin' my war-bag in." He was evidently feeling a slight embarrassment, and would have been glad to retreat. He got his war-bag from its place behind the saddle, on Patches, shouldered it, and crossed the porch. He was opening the door when Ruth's voice stopped him.

"Oh," she said, "your room. I forgot to tell you; it is the one in the northwest corner."

"Thank you, ma'am." He went in.

"Come down when you have straightened around," she called to him, "I want to talk with you about some things."

"I'll have to put Patches away, ma'am," he said, "I'd sure have to come down, anyway."

That talk was held with Uncle Jepson looking on and listening and smoking his pipe. And when it was over, Randerson took the saddle and bridle

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off Patches, turned him loose in the corral and returned to the porch to talk and smoke with Uncle Jepson.

While they sat the darkness came on, the kerosene lamp inside was lighted, delicious odors floated out to them through the screen door. Presently a horseman rode to the corral fence and dismounted.

"One of the boys, I reckon," said Randerson.

Uncle Jepson chuckled. "It's Willard," he said. He peered into Randerson's face for some signs of emotion. There were none.

"I'd clean forgot him," said Randerson.

Masten came in a few minutes later. He spoke a few words to Uncle Jepson, but ignored Randerson.

Supper was announced soon after Masten's entrance, and Uncle Jepson led Randerson around to the rear porch, where he introduced him to a tin washbasin and a roller towel. Uncle Jepson also partook of this luxury, and then led the new range boss inside.

If Ruth had any secret dread over the inevitable meeting between Masten and the new range boss, it must have been dispelled by Randerson's manner, for he was perfectly polite to Masten.

and by no word or sign did he indicate that he remembered the incident of Calamity.

Ruth watched him covertly during the meal, and was delighted to find his conduct faultless. He had not Masten's polish, of course, that was not to be expected. But she noticed this — it was quickly impressed upon her — he was not self-conscious, but entirely natural, possessing the easy grace of movement that comes of perfect muscular and mental control. He seemed to relegate self to the background; he was considerate, quiet, serene. And last — the knowledge pleased her more than anything else — he continued to keep between himself and the others the bars of deference; he made them see plainly that there would be no overstepping his position. It was his job to be here, and he had no illusions.

CHAPTER VII

HOW AN INSULT WAS AVENGED

AS the days passed, it became plain to Ruth, as it did to everyone else on the ranch — Chavis, Pickett, and Masten included — that Vickers had not talked extravagantly in recommending Randerson. Uncle Jepson declared that “he took right a-hold,” and Aunt Martha beamed proudly upon him whenever he came within range of her vision.

There was no hitch; he did his work smoothly. The spring round-up was carried to a swift conclusion, the calves were branded and turned loose again to roam the range during the summer; the corral fences were repaired, new irrigation ditches were laid, others extended — the numerous details received the attention they merited, and when summer came in earnest, the Flying W was spick and span and prospering.

Chavis and Pickett still retained their old positions, but Ruth noticed that they did not spend so much of their time around the bunkhouse as

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formerly, they seemed to have work enough to keep their time fully employed. Nor did Masten accompany them very often. He seemed to take a new interest in Ruth; he found various pretexts to be near her, and Ruth secretly congratulated herself on her wisdom in securing her new range boss. She had scarcely expected such amazing results.

She was conscious of a vague disappointment, though. For she would have liked to see more of her range boss. Twice, under pretense of wanting to look over the property, she had accompanied him to outlying cow camps, and she had noted that the men seemed to like him — they called him “Rex,” and in other ways exhibited their satisfaction over his coming. Several times she had observed meetings between him and Chavis and Pickett; invariably Chavis was sullen and disagreeable in his presence, and a number of times she had seen Pickett sneer when Randerson’s back was turned. No one had told her of the open enmity that existed between Pickett and Randerson; the latter had not hinted of it.

And Randerson was at the ranchhouse even less frequently than his predecessor; he spent much of his time with the outfit. But he came in

one afternoon, after Ruth's friendship with Hagar Catherson had progressed far, and met the nester's daughter on the porch as he was about to enter the house.

By ingenious artifice and persuasion Ruth had induced the girl to accept for her own many of the various garments in the alluring trunk, and Ruth herself had been surprised at the wonderful transformation in her appearance when arrayed in them. Hagar was attired this afternoon in a dark-blue riding habit, with short skirt — shortened by Aunt Martha — riding boots, a waist with a low collar and a flowing tie, and a soft hat that Ruth had re-made for her. She had received lessons in hair-dressing, and her brown, wavy tresses were just obstinate enough, through long neglect, to refuse to yield fully to the influence of comb and brush; they bulged under the brim of the soft hat, and some stray wisps persisted in blowing over her face.

She had just taken leave of Ruth who, at the instant Randerson stepped on the porch, was standing inside the doorway, watching her. She had given the girl a trinket that had long been coveted by her, and Hagar's eyes were bright with delight as she took leave of her friend. They

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grew even brighter when she saw Randerson on the porch, and a swift color suffused her face.

The girl stood still, looking at the range boss. A sudden whim to discover if he recognized her, took possession of her — for she had known him long and he had been a friend to her father when friends were few; she stood looking straight at him.

He gave her one quick, penetrating glance, and then stepped back, astonishment and recognition in his eyes. Then he took a quick step forward and seized her hands, holding her at arm's length, his eyes leaping in admiration.

"Why, if it ain't Hagar Catherson!" he said, wonder in his voice. "Have you just got out of a fairy book?"

Old friendship was speaking here; Ruth could not fail to understand that.

But he had not yet finished. "Why, I reckon —" he began. And then he saw Ruth, and his lips wreathed in a delighted grin. "You're the fairy, ma'am." And then he sobered. "Shucks. I'm talkin' nonsense, ma'am. I've come to tell you that the grass ain't what it ought to be where we've been, an' tomorrow we're drivin' past here to go down the river." He was

still holding Hagar's hands, and now he seemed to realize that perhaps he had been too effusive, and he flushed and dropped them. "You was just goin', I reckon," he said to the girl. And at her nod, and a quick, pleased glance from her eyes, he added: "Tell your dad that I'm comin' over to see him, pretty soon. I'd have been over before, but I've been sort of busy."

"We've been a-hopin' you'd come," answered Hagar. And with another smile at Ruth she stepped off the porch and mounted her pony.

Randerson went directly to his room, and Ruth stood for a long time at the door, watching Hagar as she rode her pony over the plains. There was a queer sensation of resentment in her breast over this exhibition of friendship; she had never thought of them knowing each other. She smiled after a while, however, telling herself that it was nothing to her. But the next time that she saw Hagar she ascertained her age. It was seventeen.

The outfit came in the next morning — fourteen punchers, the horse-wrangler having trouble as usual with the *remuda*, the cook, Chavis, and Pickett. They veered the herd toward the river and drove it past the ranchhouse and into a grass level that stretched for miles. It was near noon

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when the chuck wagon came to a halt near the bunkhouse door, and from the porch of her house Ruth witnessed a scene that she had been anticipating since her first day in the West — a group of cowboys at play.

Did these men of the plains know that their new boss had been wanting to see them in their unrestrained moments? They acted like boys — more mischievous than boys in their most frolicsome moods. Their movements were grotesque, their gestures extravagant, their talk high-pitched and flavored with a dialect that Ruth had never heard. They were “showing off”; the girl knew that. But she also knew that in their actions was much of earnestness, that an excess of vigor filled them. They were like their horses which now unleashed in the corral were running, neighing, kicking up their heels in their momentary delight of freedom.

The girl understood and sympathized with them, but she caught a glimpse of Chavis and Pickett, sitting close together on a bench at the front of the messhouse, talking seriously, and a cloud came over her face. These two men were not light-hearted as the others. What was the reason? When she went into the house a few

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minutes later, a premonition of impending trouble assailed her and would not be dismissed.

She helped Aunt Martha in the kitchen. Uncle Jepson had gone away — “nosin’ around,” he had said; Masten had ridden away toward the river some time before — he had seemed to ride toward the break in the canyon which led to the Catherson cabin; she did not know where Rander-son had gone — had not seen him for hours.

Hilarious laughter reached her, busy in the kitchen, but it did not banish the peculiar uneasiness that afflicted her. And some time later, when the laughter ceased and she went to the window and looked out, the cowboys had vanished. They had gone in to dinner. But Chavis and Pickett still sat on their bench, talking. Ruth shivered and turned from the window.

She was in better spirits shortly after dinner, and went out to the stable to look at her pony. Because of the coming of the *remuda* she had thought it best to take her pony from the corral, for she feared that in company with the other horses her own animal would return to those ungente habits which she disliked.

She fed it from some grain in a bin, carried some water in a pail from the trough at the

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windmill, and stood at the pony's head for some time, watching it. Just as she was about to turn to leave the stable, she felt the interior darken, and she wheeled quickly to see that the door had closed, and that Jim Pickett stood before it, grinning at her.

For a moment her knees shook, for she could not fail to interpret the expression of his face, then she heard a gale of laughter from the direction of the bunkhouse, and felt reassured. But while she stood, she heard the sounds of the laughter growing gradually indistinct and distant, and she gulped hard. For she knew that the cowboys were riding away — no doubt to join the herd.

She pretended to be interested in the pony, and stroked its mane with a hand that trembled, delaying to move in the hope that she might be mistaken in her fears and that Pickett would go away. But Pickett did not move. Glancing at him furtively, she saw that the grin was still on his face and that he was watching her narrowly. Then, finding that he seemed determined to stay, she pretended unconcern and faced him, meeting his gaze fearlessly.

“Is there something that you wanted to talk to me about, Pickett?” she questioned.

"Yes, ma'am," he said respectfully, though his voice seemed slightly hoarse, "I've got a letter here which I want you to read to me — I just can't sorta make out the writin'."

She almost sighed with relief. Leaving the stall she went to Pickett's side and took from his hand a paper that he held out to her. And now, in her relief over her discovery that his intentions were not evil, it suddenly dawned on her that she had forgotten that the door was closed.

"It is dark here," she said; "open the door, please."

Instead of answering, he seized the hand holding the paper, and with a swift pull tried to draw her toward him. But her muscles had been tensed with the second fear that had taken possession of her, and she resisted — almost broke away from him. His fingers slipped from her wrist, the nails scratching the flesh deeply, and she sprang toward the door. But he was upon her instantly, his arms around her, pinning her own to her sides, and then he squeezed her to him, so tightly that the breath almost left her body, and kissed her three or four times full on the lips. Then, still holding her, and looking in her eyes with an expression that filled her with horror, he said huskily:

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"Lord, but you're a hummer!"

Then, as though that were the limit of his intentions, he released her, laughed mirthlessly and threw the door open.

She had spoken no word during the attack. She made no sound now, as she went toward the house, her face ashen, her breath coming in great gasps. But a few minutes later she was in her room in the ranchhouse, on her bed, her face in the pillow, sobbing out the story of the attack to Aunt Martha, whose wrinkled face grew gray with emotion as she listened.

Masten came in an hour later. Ruth was in a chair in the sitting-room, looking very white. Aunt Martha was standing beside her.

"Why, what has happened?" Masten took a few steps and stood in front of her, looking down at her.

"Aunty will tell you." Ruth hid her face in her hands and cried softly.

Aunt Martha led the way into the kitchen, Masten following. Before he reached the door he looked back at Ruth, and a slight smile, almost a sneer, crossed his face. But when he turned to Aunt Martha, in the kitchen, his eyes were alight with well simulated curiosity.

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"Well?" he said, questioningly.

"It is most outrageous," began Aunt Martha, her voice trembling. "That man, Pickett, came upon Ruth in the stable and abused her shamefully. He actually kissed her — three or four times — and — Why, Mr. Masten, the prints of his fingers are on her wrists!"

Ruth, in the sitting-room, waited, almost in dread, for the explosion that she knew would follow Aunt Martha's words.

None came, and Ruth sank back in her chair, not knowing whether she was relieved or disappointed. There was a long silence, during which Masten cleared his throat three times. And then came Aunt Martha's voice, filled with mingled wonder and impatience:

"Aren't you going to do something Mr. Masten? Such a thing ought not to go unpunished."

"Thunder!" he said fretfully, "what on earth *can* I do? You don't expect me to go out and *fight* that man, Pickett. He'd kill me!"

"Mebbe he would," said Aunt Martha in a slightly cold voice, "but he would know that Ruth was engaged to a *man*!" There was a silence. And again came Aunt Martha's voice:

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"There was a time when men thought it an honor to fight for their women. But it seems that times have changed mightily."

"This is an age of reason, and not muscle and murder," replied Masten. "There is no more reason why I should go out there and allow Pickett to kill me than there is a reason why I should go to the first railroad, lay my head on the track and let a train run over me. There is law in this country, aunty, and it can reach Pickett."

"Your self-control does you credit, Mr. Masten." Aunt Martha's voice was low, flavored with sarcasm. Masten turned abruptly from her and went in to Ruth. Her face was still in her hands, but she felt his presence and involuntarily shrank from him.

He turned his head from her and smiled, toward the stable, and then he laid a hand on Ruth's shoulder and spoke comfortingly.

"It's too bad, Ruth. But we shall find a way to deal with Pickett without having murder done. Why not have Randerson discharge him? He is range boss, you know. In the meantime, can't you manage to stay away from places where the men might molest you? They are all unprincipled scoundrels, you must remember!"

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He left her, after a perfunctory caress which she suffered in silence. She saw him, later, as he passed her window, talking seriously to Chavis, and she imagined he was telling Chavis about the attack. Of course, she thought, with a wave of bitterness, Chavis would be able to sympathize with him. She went to her room shortly afterward.

The sun was swimming in a sea of saffron above the mountains in the western distance when Ruth again came downstairs. Hearing voices in the kitchen she went to the door and looked. Aunt Martha was standing near the kitchen table. Randerson was standing close to her, facing her, dwarfing her, his face white beneath the deep tan upon it, his lips straight and hard, his eyes narrowed, his teeth clenched; she could see the corded muscles of his lean under-jaw, set and stiff. Aunt Martha's hands were on his sleeves; her eyes were big and bright, and glowing with a strange light.

They did not see Ruth, and something in their attitudes kept her from revealing herself; she stood silent, listening, fascinated.

"So he done that!" It was Randerson's voice, and it made Ruth's heart feel heavy and cold

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within her, for in it was contempt, intolerance, rage suppressed — she felt that the words had come through clenched teeth. “I reckon I’ll be seein’ Pickett, aunty.”

And then he patted Aunt Martha’s shoulders and started for the back door. Ruth heard him open it; he must have been standing on the threshold when he spoke again. And this time he spoke in a drawl — slow, gentle:

“I reckon I’ll go wash. It was mighty dusty ridin’ today. I passed Calamity, aunty. There ain’t no mud there any more; Willard wouldn’t get mussed up, now. The suck-hole ain’t a foot deep any more.”

“You’re a scapegrace,” said Aunt Martha severely. Ruth felt that she was shaking a deprecatory finger at him. “Your manners have been neglected.” But Aunt Martha’s voice gave the words an exactly opposite meaning, and Ruth blushed.

There had been a dread fear in Ruth’s heart. For she had seen warning of impending tragedy in Randerson’s face when she had looked at him. It seemed to have passed. His, “I reckon I’ll be seein’ Pickett,” meant, perhaps, that he would discharge the man. Relieved, she went upstairs

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again and sat in a chair, looking out of a window.

A little later she saw several of the cowboys come in. She saw Pickett standing near a corner of the bunkhouse. She watched him closely, for there was something strange in his actions. He seemed to be waiting for something, or somebody. Occasionally he leaned against the corner of the bunkhouse, but she noted that he kept turning his head, keeping a lookout in all directions. Again a premonition of imminent trouble oppressed her.

And then she saw Randerson going from the ranchhouse toward the men who were congregated in front of the bunkhouse; saw Pickett's right hand fall to his side as though it rested on a holster, and she started out of her chair, for illumination now came to her.

Half way to the bunkhouse, Randerson was met by Uncle Jepson. She saw Randerson stop, observed that Uncle Jepson seemed to say something to him. She could not, of course, hear the words, "Look out, Randerson; Pickett's layin' for you," but she saw Randerson lay a hand on Uncle Jepson's shoulder.

And then he continued on his way.

She saw Randerson go close to Pickett, noted

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that the other men had all turned and were watching the two. Randerson seemed to be speaking to Pickett; the latter had faced him. Then, as she breathlessly watched, she saw Pickett reach for his gun. Randerson leaped. Pickett's gun did not come out, Randerson's hand had closed on Pickett's wrist.

There was a brief, fierce struggle, blows were struck, and then the men sprang apart. Ruth saw Randerson's right arm describe a rapid half-circle; she seemed to hear a thud as his fist landed, and Pickett reeled and fell sideways to the ground, close to the wall of the bunkhouse. She heard him curse; saw him reach again for the gun at his hip. The toe of Randerson's right boot struck Pickett's hand, driving it away from the holster; the hand was ground into the dust by Randerson's boot. And then, so quickly that she could not follow the movement, Randerson's gun was out, and Pickett lay still where he had fallen.

Presently Ruth saw Pickett get up, still menaced by Randerson's gun. Cursing, crouching, evidently still awaiting an opportunity to draw his gun, Pickett began to walk toward the ranch-house, Randerson close behind him. At a safe distance, the other men followed — Ruth saw

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Masten and Chavis come out of the bunkhouse door and follow also. The thought struck her that they must have witnessed the incident from a window. She saw them all, the cowboys at a respectable distance, Pickett and Randerson in front, with Masten and Chavis far behind, come to a halt. She divined — she believed she had suspected all along — what the march to the ranchhouse meant, but still she did not move, for she feared she could not stand.

Ruth was roused, however, by Randerson's voice. It reached her, sharp, cold, commanding. Evidently he was speaking to Aunt Martha, or to Uncle Jepson, who had gone into the house:

“Tell Miss Ruth to come here!”

Ruth obeyed. A moment later she stood on the front porch, looking at them all. This scene seemed unreal to her — the cowboys at a distance, Masten and Chavis in the rear, looking on, Pickett near the edge of the porch, his face bloated with impotent rage, his eyes glaring; the grim figure that Randerson made as he stood near Pickett, gun in hand, his eyes narrowed, alert. It seemed to her to be a dream from which she would presently awaken, trembling from the horror of it.

And then again she heard Randerson's voice.

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It was low, but so burdened with passion that it seemed to vibrate in the perfect silence. There was a threat of death in it:

"You can tell Miss Ruth that you're never goin' to play the skunk with a woman ag'in!"

Pickett writhed. But it seemed to Ruth, as her gaze shifted from Randerson to him, that Pickett's manner was not what it should be. He was not embarrassed enough, did not seem to feel his disgrace keenly enough. For though he twisted and squirmed under the threat in Randerson's voice, there was an odd smirk on his face that impressed her as nearly concealing a malignant cunning. And his voice sounded insincere to her — there was even no flavor of shame in them:

"I'm sorry I done what I did, ma'am."

"I reckon that's all, Pickett. You draw your time right now."

Randerson sheathed his pistol and turned slightly sidewise to Pickett, evidently intending to come up on the porch.

Ruth gasped. For she saw Pickett reach for his gun. It was drawn half out of its holster. As though he had divined what was in Pickett's mind, Randerson had turned slightly at Pickett's movement. There was a single rapid movement to

his right hip, the twilight was split by a red streak, by another that followed it so closely as to seem to make the two continuous. Pickett's hand dropped oddly from the half-drawn weapon, his knees sagged, he sighed and pitched heavily forward, face down, at Randerson's feet.

Dimly, as through a haze, Ruth saw a number of the cowboys coming toward her, saw them approach and look curiously down at the thing that lay almost at her feet. And then someone took her by the arm — she thought it was Uncle Jepson — and she was led toward the door. At the threshold she paused, for Randerson's voice, cold and filled with deadly definiteness, reached her:

“Do you want to take his end of this?” Ruth turned. Randerson was pointing to Pickett's body, ghastly in its prone slackness. He was looking at Chavis.

Evidently Chavis elected not to avenge his friend at that moment. For there was a dead silence while one might have counted fifty. Then Ruth was drawn into the house.

CHAPTER VIII

WHAT UNCLE JEPSON HEARD

EVERY detail of the killing of Jim Pickett remained vivid in Ruth's recollection. She felt that she would never forget it. But her horror gradually abated, and at the end of a week she was able to look at Randerson without shuddering. During the week she had evaded him. And he, divining the state of her feelings, kept away from the house as much as possible.

Masten's demeanor on hearing of the insult that had been offered her by Pickett had seemed that of a man who was lacking in courage: at the time she had not been able to make it conform to her ideas of a man's duty to the woman he had promised to marry — or to any woman. She had heard him speak of reason in connection with the affair, as though there were no such thing in the world as rage so justifiable as to make a man yearn to inflict punishment upon another man who had attacked his woman. He had looked upon the matter cold-bloodedly, and she

had resented that. But now that she had been avenged, she felt that she had been wrong. It had been such a trivial thing, after all; the punishment seemed monstrous in comparison with it. She had seen Pickett's movement when Randerson had momentarily turned his back to him, but she had also seen Randerson's retaliatory movement. She had known then, that Randerson had expected Pickett's action, and that he had been prepared for it, and therefore it seemed to her that in forcing the trouble Randerson had not only foreseen the ending but had even courted it.

Remorse over her momentary doubt of Masten's motive in refusing to call Pickett to account, afflicted her. He had been wiser than she; he had traced the line that divided reason from the primitive passions — man from beast. His only reference to the incident — a wordless one, which she felt was sufficiently eloquent — came when one day, while they were standing beside the corral fence, looking at the horses, they saw Randerson riding in. Masten nodded toward him and shook his head slowly from side to side, compressing his lips as he did so. And then, seeing her looking at him, he smiled com-

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passionately, as though to say that he regretted the killing of Pickett as well as she.

She seized his arm impulsively.

"I was wrong, Willard," she said.

"Wrong, dear?" he said. "It wasn't your fault."

"But I thought — things about you that I shouldn't have thought. I felt that you ought to have punished Pickett. I am glad, now, that you didn't." She shuddered, and looked again at Randerson, just dismounting at the bunkhouse, paying no attention to them.

"Then you wouldn't have me like him?" He indicated Randerson.

"No," she said.

He gave her shoulder a slight pressure, and turning his head, smiled triumphantly.

Later, when they had walked to a far corner of the pasture, talking confidentially and laughing a little, he halted and drew her close to him.

"Ruth," he said, gently, "the world is going very well for you now. You are settled here, you like it, and things are running smoothly. Why not take a ride over to Lazette one of these days. There is a justice of the peace over there. It won't need to be a formal affair, you know.

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Just on the quiet — a sort of a lark. I have waited a long time," he coaxed.

She smiled at his earnestness. But that spark which he had tried in vain to fan into flame still smoldered. She felt no responsive impulse; a strange reluctance dragged at her.

"Wait, Willard," she said, "until after the fall round-up. There is no hurry. We are sure of each other."

They went on toward the ranchhouse. When they passed the bunkhouse, and through the open door saw Randerson and Uncle Jepson sitting on a bench smoking, Ruth quickened her step, and Masten made a grimace of hatred.

Inside the bunkhouse, Uncle Jepson, who had been speaking, paused long enough to wrinkle his nose at Masten. Randerson's expression did not change; it was one of grave expectancy.

"You was sayin' — " he prompted, looking at Uncle Jepson.

"That the whole darned deal was a frame-up," declared Uncle Jepson. "I was settin' in the messhouse along in the afternoon of the day of the killin' — smokin' an' thinkin', but most of the time just settin', I cal'late, when I heard

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Chavis an' Pickett talkin' low an' easy outside. They was a crack in the wall, an' I plastered one ear up ag'in it, an' took in all they was sayin'. First, they was talkin' about the bad feelin' between you an' Pickett. Pickett said he wanted to 'git' you, an' that Masten wanted to get you out of the way because of what you'd done to him at Calamity. But I reckon that ain't the real reason; he's got some idea that you an' Ruth — "

"Shucks," said Randerson impatiently.

"Anyway," grinned Uncle Jepson, "for some reason, he don't want you hangin' around. Far as I could gather, Pickett wanted some excuse to have you fire him, so's he could shoot you. He talked some to Masten about it, an' Masten told him to tackle Ruth, but not to get too rough about it, an' not to go too far."

"Great guns! The low-down, mean, sneakin' — " said Randerson. His eyes were glowing; his words came with difficulty through his straightened lips.

"Masten wouldn't take it up, he told Pickett," went on Uncle Jepson. "He'd put it up to you. An' when you'd tackle Pickett about it, Pickett would shoot you. If they was any chance for Chavis to help along, he'd do it. But mostly,

Pickett was to do the job. I cal'late that's about all — except that I layed for you an' told you to look out."

"You heard this talk after — after Pickett had —"

"Of course," growled Uncle Jepson, a venomous flash in his eyes, slightly reproachful.

"Sure — of course," agreed Randerson. He was grim-eyed; there was cold contempt in the twist of his lips. He sat for a long time, silent, staring out through the door, Uncle Jepson watching him, subdued by the look in his eyes.

When he spoke at last, there was a cold, bitter humor in his voice.

"So that's Willard's measure!" he said. "He grades up like a side-winder slidin' under the sagebrush. There's nothin' clean about him but his clothes. But he's playin' a game — him an' Chavis. An' I'm the guy they're after!" He laughed, and Uncle Jepson shivered. "She's seen one killin', an' I reckon, if she stays here a while longer, she'll see another: Chavis'." He stopped and then went on: "Why, I reckon Chavis dyin' wouldn't make no more impression on her than Pickett dyin'. But I reckon she thinks a heap of Willard, don't she, Uncle Jep?"

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“ If a girl promises — ” began Uncle Jepson.

“ I reckon — ” interrupted Randerson. And then he shut his lips and looked grimly out at the horses in the corral.

“ Do you reckon she'd — ” Randerson began again, after a short silence. “ No,” he answered the question himself, “ I reckon if you'd tell her she wouldn't believe you. No good woman will believe anything bad about the man she loves — or thinks she loves. But Willard — ”

He got up, walked out the door, mounted Patches and rode away. Going to the door, Uncle Jepson watched him until he faded into the shimmering sunshine of the plains.

“ I cal'late that Willard — ”

But he, too, left his speech unfinished, as though thought had suddenly ceased, or speculation had become futile and ridiculous.

CHAPTER IX

"SOMETHIN'S GONE OUT OF THEM"

AS Randerson rode Patches through the break in the canyon wall in the afternoon of a day about a week after his talk with Uncle Jepson in the bunkhouse, he was thinking of the visit he intended to make. He had delayed it long. He had not seen Abe Catherson since taking his new job.

"I reckon he'll think I'm right unneighborly," he said to himself as he rode.

When he reached the nester's cabin, the dog Nig greeted him with vociferous affection, bringing Hagar to the door.

"Oh, it's Rex!" cried the girl delightedly. And then, reproachfully: "Me an' dad allowed you wasn't comin' any more!"

"You an' dad was a heap mistaken, then," he grinned as he dismounted and trailed the reins over the pony's head. "I've had a heap to 'tend to," he added as he stepped on the porch and came to a halt, looking at her. "Why, I reckon

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the little kid I used to know ain't here any more!" he said, his eyes alight with admiration, as he critically examined her garments from the distance that separated her from him—a neat house dress of striped gingham, high at the throat, the bottom hem reaching below her shoe-tops; a loose-fitting apron over the dress, drawn tightly at the waist, giving her figure graceful curves. He had never thought of Hagar in connection with beauty; he had been sorry for her, pitying her—she had been a child upon whom he had bestowed much of the unselfish devotion of his heart; indeed, there had been times when it had assumed a practical turn, and through various ruses much of his wages had been delicately forced upon the nester. It had not always been wisely expended, for he knew that Catherson drank deeply at times.

Now, however, Randerson realized that the years must inevitably make a change in Hagar. That glimpse he had had of her on the Flying W ranchhouse porch had made him think, but her appearance now caused him to think more deeply. It made constraint come into his manner.

"I reckon your dad ain't anywhere around?" he said.

"Dad's huntin' up some cattle this mornin'," she told him. "Shucks," she added, seeing him hesitate, "ain't you comin' in?"

"Why, I've been wonderin' " and he grinned guiltily "whether it'd be exactly proper. You see, there was a time when I busted right in the house without waitin' for an invitation — tickled to get a chance to dawdle a kid on my knee. But I reckon them dawdle-days is over. I wouldn't think of tryin' to dawdle a *woman* on my knee. But if you think that you're still Hagar Catherson, an' you won't be dead-set on me dawdlin' you — Why, shucks, I reckon I'm talkin' like a fool!" And his face blushed crimson.

Her face was red too, but she seemed to be less conscious of the change in herself than he, though her eyes drooped when he looked at her.

He followed her inside and formally took a chair, sitting on its edge and turning his hat over and over in his hands, looking much at it, as if it were new and he admired it greatly.

But this constraint between them was not the only thing that was new to him. While she talked, he sat and listened, and stole covert glances at her, and tried to convince himself that it was really Hagar that was sitting there before him.

"SOMETHIN'S GONE OUT OF THEM"

But before long he grew accustomed to the strangeness of the situation, and constraint dropped from him. "Why, I reckon it's all natural," he confided to her. "Folks grow up, don't they? Take you. Yesterday you was a kid, an' I dawdled you on my knee. Today you're a woman, an' it makes me feel some breathless to look at you. But it's all natural. I'd been seein' you so much that I'd forgot that time was makin' a woman of you."

She blushed, and he marveled over it. "She can't see, herself, how she's changed," he told himself. And while they talked he studied her, noting that her color was higher than he had ever seen it, that the frank expression of her eyes had somehow changed — there was a glow in them, deep, abiding, embarrassed. They drooped from his when he tried to hold her gaze. He had always admired the frank directness of them — that told of unconsciousness of sex, of unquestioning trust. Today, it seemed to him, there was subtle knowledge in them. He was puzzled and disappointed. And when, half an hour later, he took his leave, after telling her that he would come again, to see her "dad," he took her by the shoulders and forced her to look into his eyes.

His own searched hers narrowly. It was as in the old days — in his eyes she was still a child.

“ I reckon I won’t kiss you no more, Hagar,” he said. “ You ain’t a kid no more, an’ it wouldn’t be square. Seventeen is an awful old age, ain’t it? ”

And then he mounted and rode down the trail, still puzzled over the lurking, deep glow in her eyes.

“ I reckon I ain’t no expert on women’s eyes,” he said as he rode. “ But Hagar’s — there’s somethin’ gone out of them.”

He could not have reached the break in the canyon leading to the plains above the river, when Willard Masten loped his horse toward the Catherson cabin from an opposite direction.

Hagar was standing on the porch when he came, and her face flooded with color when she saw him. She stood, her eyes drooping with shy embarrassment as Masten dismounted and approached her. And then, as his arm went around her waist, familiarly, he whispered:

“ How is my little woman today? ”

She straightened and looked up at him, perplexity in her eyes.

“ Rex Randerson was just hyeh,” she said.

"SOMETHIN'S GONE OUT OF THEM"

"I wanted to tell him about you wantin' me to marry you. But I thought of what you told me, an' I didn't. Do you sure reckon he'd kill you, if he knowed?"

"He certainly would," declared Masten, earnestly. "No one — not even your father — must know that I come here to see you."

"I reckon I won't tell. But Miss Ruth? Are you sure she don't care for you any more?"

"Well," he lied glibly; "she has broken our engagement. But if she knew that I come here to see you she'd be jealous, you know. So it's better not to tell her. If you do tell her, I'll stop coming," he threatened.

"It's hard to keep from tellin' folks how happy I am," she said. "Once, I was afraid Rex Rander-son could see it in my eyes — when he took a-hold of my arms hyeh, an' looked at me."

Masten looked jealously at her. "Looked at you, eh?" he said. "Are you sure he didn't try to do anything else — didn't *do* anything else? Like kissing you, for instance?"

"I'm certain sure," she replied, looking straight at him. "He used to kiss me. But he says I'm a woman, now, an' it wouldn't be square to kiss me any more." Her eyes had drooped from his.

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“An’ I reckon that’s right, too, ain’t it?” She looked up again, not receiving an answer. “Why, how red your face is!” she exclaimed. “I ain’t said nothin’ to hurt you, have I?”

“No,” he said. But he held her tightly to him, her head on his shoulder, so that she might not see the guilt in his eyes.

CHAPTER X

THE LAW OF THE PRIMITIVE

RANDERSON continued his policy of not forcing himself upon Ruth. He went his way, silent, thoughtful, attending strictly to business. To Ruth, watching him when he least suspected it, it seemed that he had grown more grim and stern-looking since his coming to the Flying W. She saw him, sometimes, laughing quietly with Uncle Jepson; other times she heard him talking gently to Aunt Martha — with an expression that set her to wondering whether he were the same man that she had seen that day with the pistol in hand, shooting the life out of a fellow being. There were times when she wavered in her conviction of his heartlessness.

Since Ruth had announced her decision not to marry Masten until after the fall round-up, she had not seen so much of him. He rode alone, sometimes not even asking her to accompany him. These omissions worked no great hardship on her, for the days had grown hot and the plains

dry and dusty, so that there was not so much enjoyment in riding as formerly. Besides, she knew the country rather well now, and had no need to depend upon Masten.

Chavis had severed his connection with the Flying W. He had ridden in to the ranchhouse some weeks ago, found Ruth sitting on the porch, announced that he was "quittin'" and wanted his "time." She did not ask him why he wanted to quit so pleased was she with his decision, but he advanced an explanation while she counted the money due him.

"Things don't suit me here," he said venomously. "Randerson is too fresh." He looked at her impudently. "Besides," he added, "he stands in too well with the boss."

She flushed with indignation. "You wouldn't dare say that to *him*!" she declared.

He reddened darkly. "Meanin' what he done to Pickett, I reckon," he sneered. "Well, Randerson will be gettin' his'n some day, too!"

Ruth remembered this conversation, and on a day about a month later when she had gone riding alone, she saw Randerson at a distance and rode toward him to tell him, for she had meant to, many times.

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Evidently Randerson had seen her, too, for he had already altered his pony's course when she wheeled hers. When their ponies came to a halt near each other it was Randerson who spoke first. He looked at her unsmilingly over his pony's head.

"I was ridin' in to the house to see you, ma'am. I thought you ought to know. This mornin' the boys found two cows with their hoofs burned, an' their calves run off."

"Their hoofs burned!" she exclaimed. "Why, who would be so inhuman as to do that? But I suppose there was a fire somewhere, and it happened that way."

"There was a fire, all right," he said grimly. "Some one built it, on purpose. It was rustlers, ma'am. They burned the hoofs of the mothers so the mothers couldn't follow when they drove their calves off — like any mother would." He eyed her calmly. "I reckon it was Chavis, ma'am. He's got a shack down the crick a ways. He's been there ever since you paid him off. An' this mornin' two of the boys told me they wanted their time. I was goin' in to get it for them. It's likely they're goin' to join Chavis."

"Well, let them," she said indignantly. "If

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they are that kind of men, we don't want them around! "

He smiled now for the first time. " I reckon there ain't no way to stop them from goin', ma'am. An' we sure don't want them around. But when they go with Chavis, it's mighty likely that we'll miss more cattle."

She stiffened. " Come with me," she ordered; " they shall have their money right away."

She urged her pony on, and he fell in beside her, keeping his animal's muzzle near her stirrup. For he was merely an employee and was filled with respect for her.

" I suppose I could have Chavis charged with stealing those two calves?" she asked, as they rode. She looked back over her shoulder at him and slowed her pony down so that he came alongside.

" Why, yes, ma'am, I reckon you could. You could charge him with stealin' them. But that wouldn't prove it. We ain't got any evidence, you see. We found the cows, with the calves gone. We know that Chavis is in the country, but we didn't see him doin' the stealin'; we only think he done it."

" If I should complain to the sheriff?"

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"You could do that, ma'am. But I reckon it's a waste of time."

"How?"

"Well, you see, ma'am, the sheriff in this county don't amount to a heap — considered as a sheriff. He mostly draws his salary an' keeps out of trouble, much as he can. There ain't no court in the county nearer than Las Vegas, an' that's a hundred an' fifty miles from here. An', mostly, the court don't want to be bothered with hearin' rustler cases — there bein' no regular law governin' them, an' conviction bein' hard to get. So the sheriff don't bother."

"But there must be some way to stop them from stealing!" she said sharply.

"I reckon there's a way, ma'am." And now she heard him laugh, quietly, and again she turned and looked at him. His face grew grave again, instantly. "But I reckon you wouldn't approve of it, ma'am," he added.

"I would approve of most any method of stopping them — within reason!" she declared vindictively, nettled by his tone.

"We mostly hang them, ma'am," he said. "That's a sure way of stoppin' them."

She shuddered. "Do you mean that you hang

them without a court verdict — on your own responsibility? ”

“ That’s the way, ma’am.”

“ But doesn’t the sheriff punish men who hang others in that manner? ” she went on in tones of horror.

His voice was quietly humorous. “ Them sort of hangin’s ain’t advertised a heap. It’s hard to find anybody that will admit he had a hand in it. Nobody knows anything about it. But it’s done, an’ can’t be undone. An’ the rustlin’ stops mighty sudden.”

“ Oh,” she exclaimed, “ what a barbarous custom! ”

“ I reckon it ain’t exactly barbarous, ma’am,” he contended mildly. “ Would you have the rustlers go on stealin’ forever, an’ not try to stop them? ”

“ There are the courts,” she insisted.

“ Turnin’ rustlers off scot-free, ma’am. They can’t hold them. An’ if a rustler is hung, he don’t get any more than is comin’ to him. Do you reckon there’s a lot of difference between a half dozen men hangin’ a man for a crime he’s done, than for one man, a judge for instance, orderin’ him to be hung? If, we’ll say, a hundred

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men elect a judge to do certain things, is it any more wrong for the hundred men to do them things than for the man they've elected to do them? I reckon not, ma'am. Of course, if the hundred men did somethin' that the judge hadn't been elected to do, why then, it might make some difference."

"But you say there is no law that provides hanging for rustling." She thought she had him.

"The men that elected the judge made the laws," he said. "They have a right to make others, whenever they're needed."

"That's mob law," she said with a shiver. "What would become of the world if that custom were followed everywhere?"

"I wouldn't say that it would be a good thing everywhere. Where there's courts that can be got at easy, there'd be no sense to it. But out here there's no other way for a man to protect his property. He's got to take the law into his own hands."

"It is a crude and cold-blooded way."

She heard him laugh, and turned to see him looking at her in amusement.

"There ain't no refinement in punishment, ma'am. Either it's got to shock some one or not

get done at all. I reckon that back East you don't get to see anyone punished, or hung. You hear about it, or you read about it, an' it don't seem so near you, an' that kind of takes the edge off it. Out here it comes closer, an' it seems a lot cruel. But whether a man's punished by the law or by the men who make the law wouldn't make a lot of difference to the man — he'd be punished anyway."

"We won't talk about it any further," she said. "But understand, if there are any cattle thieves caught on the Flying W they must not be hanged. You must capture them, if possible, and take them to the proper officials, that they may have a fair trial. And we shall abide by the court's decision. I don't care to have any more murders committed here."

His face paled. "Referrin' to Pickett, I reckon, ma'am?" he said.

"Yes." She flung the monosyllable back at him resentfully.

She felt him ride close to her, and she looked at him and saw that his face was grimly serious.

"I ain't been thinkin' of the killin' of Pickett as murder, ma'am. Pickett had it comin' to him. You was standin' on the porch, an' I reckon you

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used your eyes. If you did, you saw Pickett try to pull his gun on me when my back was turned. It was either him or me, ma'am."

"You anticipated that he would try to shoot you," she charged. "Your actions showed that."

"Why, I reckon I did. You see, I've knowed Pickett for a long time."

"I was watching you from an upstairs window," she went on. "I saw you when you struck Pickett with your fist. You drew your pistol while he was on the ground. You had the advantage—you might have taken his pistol away from him, and prevented any further trouble. Instead, you allowed him to keep it. You expected he would try to shoot you, and you deliberately gave him an opportunity, relying upon your quickness in getting your own pistol out."

"I give him his chance, ma'am."

"His chance." There was derision in her voice. "I have talked to some of the men about you. They say you are the cleverest of any man in this vicinity with a weapon. You deliberately planned to kill him!"

He rode on, silently, a glint of cold humor in his eyes. He might now have confounded her

with the story of Masten's connection with the affair, but he had no intention of telling her. Masten had struck the blow at him — Masten it must be, who would be struck back.

However, he was disturbed over her attitude. He did not want her to think that he had killed Pickett in pure wantonness, for he had not thought of shooting the man until Uncle Jepson had warned him.

“ I've got to tell you this, ma'am,” he said, riding close to her. “ One man's life is as good as another's in this country. But it ain't any better. The law's too far away to monkey with — law like you're used to. The gun a man carries is the only law anyone here pays any attention to. Every man knows it. Nobody makes any mistakes about it, unless it's when they don't get their gun out quick enough. An' that's the man's fault that pulls the gun. There ain't no officials to do any guardin' out here; you've got to do it yourself or it don't get done. A man can't take too many chances — an' live to tell about it. When you know a man's lookin' for you, yearnin' to perforate you, it's just a question of who can shoot the quickest an' the straightest. In the case of Pickett, I happened to be the one.

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It might have been Pickett. If he wasn't as fast as me in slingin' his gun, why, he oughtn't to have taken no chance. He'd have been plumb safe if he'd have forgot all about his gun. I don't reckon that I'd have pined away with sorrow if I hadn't shot him."

She was much impressed with his earnestness, and she looked quickly at him, nearly convinced. But again the memory of the tragic moment became vivid in her thoughts, and she shuddered.

"It's too horrible to think of!" she declared.

"I reckon it's no picnic," he admitted. "I ain't never been stuck on shootin' men. I reckon I didn't sleep a heap for three nights after I shot Pickett. I kept seein' him, an' pityin' him. But I kept tellin' myself that it had to be either him or me, an' I kind of got over it. Pickett *would* have it, ma'am. When I turned my back to him I was hopin' that he wouldn't try to play dirt on me. Do you reckon he oughtn't to have been made to tell you that he had been wrong in tacklin' you? Why, ma'am, I kind of liked Pickett. He wasn't all bad. He was one of them kind that's easy led, an' he wasn't a heap responsible; he fell in with the wrong kind of men — men like Chavis. I've took a lot from Pickett."

"You might have shown him in some other way that you liked him," she said with unsmiling sarcasm. "It seems to me that men who go about thinking of shooting each other must have a great deal of the brute in them."

"Meanin' that they ain't civilized, I reckon?"

"Yes. Mr. Masten had the right view. He refused to resort to the methods you used in bringing Pickett to account. He is too much a gentleman to act the savage."

For an instant Randerson's eyes lighted with a deep fire. And then he smiled mirthlessly.

"I reckon Mr. Masten ain't never had anybody stir him up right proper," he said mildly. "It takes different things to get a man riled so's he'll fight — or a woman, either. Either of 'em will fight when the right thing gets them roused. I expect that deep down in everybody is a little of that brute that you're talkin' about. I reckon you'd fight like a tiger, ma'am, if the time ever come when you had to."

"I never expect to kill anybody," she declared, coldly.

"You don't know what you'll do when the time comes, ma'am. You've been livin' in a part of the country where things are done accordin' to

hard an' fast rules. Out here things run loose, an' if you stay here long enough some day you'll meet them an' recognize them for your own — an' you'll wonder how you ever got along without them." He looked at her now with a subtle grin. But his words were direct enough, and his voice rang earnestly as he went on: "Why, I reckon you've never been tuned up to nature, ma'am. Have you ever hated anybody real venomous?"

"I have been taught differently," she shot back at him. "I have never hated anybody."

"Then you ain't never loved anybody, ma'am. You'd be jealous of the one you loved, an' you'd hate anybody you saw makin' eyes at them."

"Well, of all the odd ideas!" she said. She was so astonished at the turn his talk had taken that she halted her pony and faced him, her cheeks coloring.

"I don't reckon it's any odd idea, ma'am. Unless human nature is an odd idea, an' I reckon it's about the oldest thing in the world, next to love an' hate." He grinned at her unblushingly, and leaned against the saddle horn.

"I reckon you ain't been a heap observin', ma'am," he said frankly, but very respectfully.

" You'd have seen that odd idea worked out many times, if you was. With animals an' men it's the same. A kid — which you won't claim don't love its mother — is jealous of a brother or a sister which it thinks is bein' favored more than him, an' if the mother don't show that she's pretty square in dealin' with the two, there's bound to be hate born right there. What do you reckon made Cain kill his brother, Abel?

" Take a woman — a wife. Some box-heads, when their wife falls in love with another man, give her up like they was takin' off an old shoe, sayin' they love her so much that they want to see her happy — which she can't be, she says, unless she gets the other man. But don't you go to believin' that kind of fairy romance, ma'am. When a man is so willin' to give up his wife to another man he's sure got a heap tired of her an' don't want her any more. He's got his eye peeled for Number Two, an' he's thankin' his wife's lover for makin' the trail clear for the matrimonial wagon. But givin' up Number One to the other man gives him a chance to pose a lot, an' mebbe it's got a heap of effect on Number Two, who sort of thinks that if she gets tied up to such a sucker she'll be able to wrap him around

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her finger. But if he loves Number Two, he'll be mighty grumpy to the next fellow that goes to makin' sheeps eyes at her."

"That is a highly original view," she said, laughing, feeling that she ought to be offended, but disarmed by his ingenuousness. "And so you think that love and hate are inseparable passions."

"I reckon you can't know what real love is unless you have hated, ma'am. Some folks say they get through life without hatin' anybody, but if you'll look around an' watch them, you'll find they're mostly an unfeelin' kind. You ain't one of them kind, ma'am. I've watched you, an' I've seen that you've got a heap of spirit. Some of these days you're goin' to wake up. An' when you do, you'll find out what love is."

"Don't you think I love Mr. Masten?" she said, looking at him unwaveringly.

He looked as fairly back at her. "I don't reckon you do, ma'am. Mebbe you think so, but you don't."

"What makes you think so?" she demanded, defiantly.

"Why, the way you look at him, ma'am. If I was engaged to a girl an' she looked at me as

critical as you look at him, sometimes, I'd sure feel certain that I'd drawn the wrong card."

Still her eyes did not waver. She began to sense his object in introducing this subject, and she was determined to make him feel that his conclusions were incorrect — as she knew they were.

"That is an example of your wonderful power of observation," she said, "the kind you were telling me about, which makes you able to make such remarkable deductions. But if you are no more correct in the others than you are in trying to determine the state of my feelings toward Mr. Masten, you are entirely wrong. I *do* love Mr. Masten!"

She spoke vehemently, for she thought herself very much in earnest.

But he grinned. "You're true blue," he said, "an' you've got the grit to tell where you stand. But you're mistaken. You couldn't love Masten."

"Why?" she said, so intensely curious that she entirely forgot to think of his impertinence in talking thus to her. "Why can't I love Mr. Masten?"

He laughed, and reddened. "Because you're goin' to love me, ma'am," he said, gently.

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She would have laughed if she had not felt so indignant. She would have struck him as she had struck Chavis had she not been positive that behind his words was the utmost respect — that he did not intend to be impertinent — that he seemed as natural as he had been all along. She would have exhibited scorn if she could have summoned it. She did nothing but stare at him in genuine amazement. She was going to be severe with him, but the mild humor of his smile brought confusion upon her.

“You don’t lack conceit, whatever your other shortcomings,” she managed, her face rosy.

“Well now, I’m thankin’ you, ma’am, for lettin’ me off so easy,” he said. “I was expectin’ you’d be pretty hard on me for talkin’ that way. I’ve been wonderin’ what made me say it. I expect it’s because I’ve been thinkin’ it so strong. Anyway, it’s said, an’ I can’t take it back. I wouldn’t want to, for I was bound to tell you some time, anyway. I reckon it ain’t conceit that made me say it. I’ve liked you a heap ever since I got hold of your picture.”

“So that is where the picture went!” she said. “I have been hunting high and low for it. Who gave it to you?”

"Wes Vickers, ma'am." There was disgust in his eyes. "I never meant to mention it, ma'am; that was a slip of the tongue. But when I saw the picture, I knowed I was goin' to love you. There ain't nothin' happened yet to show that you won't think a lot of me, some day."

"You frighten me," she mocked.

"I reckon you ain't none frightened," he laughed. "But I expect you're some disturbed — me sayin' what I've said while you're engaged to Masten. I'm apologizing ma'am. You be loyal to Masten — as I know you'd be, anyway. An' some day, when you've broke off with him, I'll come a-courtin'."

"So you're sure that I'm going to break my engagement with Masten, are you?" she queried, trying her best to be scornful, but not succeeding very well. "How do you know that?"

"There's somethin' that you don't see that's been tellin' me, ma'am. Mebbe some day that thing will be tellin' you the same stuff, an' then you'll understand," he said enigmatically.

"Well," she said, pressing her lips together as though this were to be her last word on the subject; "I have heard that the wilderness sometimes makes people dream strange dreams, and I

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suppose yours is one of them." She wheeled her pony and sent it scampering onward toward the ranchhouse.

He followed, light of heart, for while she had taunted him, she had also listened to him, and he felt that progress had been made.

CHAPTER XI

HAGAR'S EYES

RANDERSON had been in no hurry to make an attempt to catch the rustlers whose depredations he had reported to Ruth. He had told the men to be doubly alert to their work, and he had hired two new men — from the Diamond H — to replace those who had left the Flying W. His surmise that they wanted to join Chavis had been correct, for the two new men — whom he had put on special duty and had been given permission to come and go when they pleased — had reported this fact to him. There was nothing to do, however, but to wait, in the hope that one day the rustlers would attempt to run cattle off when one or more of the men happened to be in the vicinity. And then, if the evidence against the rustlers were convincing enough, much would depend on the temper of himself and the men as to whether Ruth's orders that there should be no hanging would be observed. There would be time enough to decide that question if any rustlers were caught.

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He had seen little of the Easterner during the past two or three weeks. Masten rarely showed himself on the range any more — to Randerson's queries about him the men replied that they hadn't seen him. But Randerson was thinking very little about Masten as he rode through the brilliant sunshine this afternoon. He was going again to Catherson's, to see Hagar. Recollections of the change that had come over the girl were disquieting, and he wanted to talk to her again to determine whether she really had changed, or whether he had merely fancied it.

Far down the river he crossed at a shallow ford, entered a section of timber, and loped Patches slowly through this. He found a trail that he had used several times before, when he had been working for the Diamond H and necessity or whim had sent him this way, and rode it, noting that it seemed to have been used much, lately.

"I reckon old Abe's poundin' his horses considerable. Why, it's right plain," he added, after a little reflection, "this here trail runs into the Lazette trail, down near the ford. An' Abe's wearin' it out, ridin' to Lazette for red-eye. I reckon if I was Abe, I'd quit while the quittin's

good." He laughed, patting Patches' shoulder. "Shucks, a man c'n see another man's faults pretty far, but his own is pretty near invisible. You've rode the Lazette trail a heap, too, Patches," he said, "when your boss was hittin' red-eye. We ain't growin' no angels' wings, Patches, which would give us the right to go to criticizin' others."

Presently he began to ride with more caution, for he wanted to surprise Hagar. A quarter of a mile from the cabin he brought Patches to a halt on a little knoll and looked about him. He had a good view of the cabin in the clearing, and he watched it long, for signs of life. He saw no such signs.

"Abe's out putterin' around, an' Hagar's nappin', I reckon — or tryin' on her new dresses," he added as an after-thought.

He was about to ride on, when a sound reached his ears, and he drew the reins tight on Patches and sat rigid, alert, listening.

The perfect silence of the timber was unbroken. He had almost decided that his ears had played him a trick when the sound came again, nearer than before — the sound of voices. Quickly and accurately he determined from which direction

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they came, and he faced that way, watching a narrow path that led through the timber to a grass plot not over a hundred feet from him, from which he was screened by some thick-growing brush at his side.

He grinned, fully expecting to see Abe and Hagar on the path presently. "Abe's behavin' today," he told himself as he waited. "I'll sure surprise them, if —"

Suddenly he drew his breath sharply, his teeth came together viciously, and his brows drew to a frown, his eyes gleaming coldly underneath. For he saw Willard Masten coming along the path, smiling and talking, and beside him, his arm around her waist, also smiling, but with her head bent forward a little, was Hagar Catherson.

The color slowly left Randerson's face as he watched. He had no nice scruples about eaves-dropping at this moment — here was no time for manners; the cold, contemptuous rage that fought within him was too deep and gripping to permit of any thought that would not center about the two figures on the path. He watched them, screened by the brush, with the deadly concentration of newly aroused murder-lust. Once, as he saw them halt at the edge of the grass plot, and

he observed Masten draw Hagar close to him and kiss her, his right hand dropped to the butt of his pistol at his right hip, and he fingered it uncertainly. He drew the hand away at last, though, with a bitter, twisting smile.

Five minutes later, his face still stony and expressionless, he dismounted lightly and with infinite care and caution led Patches away from the knoll and far back into the timber. When he was certain there was no chance of his being seen or heard by Masten and Hagar, he mounted, urged Patches forward and made a wide detour which brought him at length to the path which had been followed by Masten and Hagar in reaching the grass plot. He loped the pony along this path, and presently he came upon them — Hagar standing directly in the path, watching him, red with embarrassment which she was trying hard to conceal; Masten standing on the grass plot near her, staring into the timber opposite; Randerson, trying to appear unconcerned and making a failure of it.

“It's Rex!” ejaculated the girl. Her hands had been clasped in front of her; they dropped to her sides when she saw Randerson, and her fingers began to twist nervously into the edges of

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her apron. A deep breath, which was almost a sigh of relief, escaped her. "I thought it was Dad!" she said.

Evidently Masten had likewise expected the horseman to be her father, for at her exclamation he turned swiftly. His gaze met Randerson's, his shoulders sagged a little, his eyes wavered and shifted from the steady ones that watched him.

His composure returned quickly, however, and he smiled blandly, but there was a trace of derision in his voice:

"You've strayed off your range, haven't you, Randerson?" he said smoothly.

"Why, I reckon I have." Randerson's voice was low, almost gentle, and he smiled mildly at Hagar, who blushing returned it but immediately looked downward.

"I expect dad must be gone somewhere — that you're lookin' for him," Randerson said. "I thought mebbe I'd ketch him here."

"He went to Red Rock this mornin'," said the girl. She looked up, and this time met Randerson's gaze with more confidence, for his pretense of casualness had set her fears at rest. "Mr. Masten come over to see him, too."

The lie came hesitatingly through her lips.

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She looked at Masten as though for confirmation, and the latter nodded.

"Catherson is hard to catch," he said. "I've been over here a number of times, trying to see him." His voice was a note too high, and Randerson wondered whether, without the evidence of his eyes, he would have suspected Masten. He decided that he would, and his smile was a trifle grim.

"I reckon Catherson is a regular dodger," he returned. "He's always gallivantin' around the country when somebody wants to see him." He smiled gently at Hagar, with perhaps just a little pity.

"It's getting along in the afternoon, Hagar," he said. "Dad ought to be amblin' back here before long." His face grew grave at the frightened light in her eyes when he continued: "I reckon me an' Masten better wait for him, so's he won't dodge us any more." He cast a glance around him. "Where's your cayuse?" he said to Masten.

"I left him down near the ford," returned the other.

"Right on your way back to the Flyin' W," said Randerson, as though the discovery pleased

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him. "I'm goin' to the Flyin' W, too, soon as I see Catherson. I reckon, if you two ain't got no particular yearnin' to go prowlin' around in the timber any longer, we'll all go back to Catherson's shack an' wait for him there. Three'll be company, while it'd be mighty lonesome for one."

Masten cleared his throat and looked intently at Randerson's imperturbable face. Did he know anything? A vague unrest seized Masten. Involuntarily he shivered, and his voice was a little hoarse when he spoke, though he attempted to affect carelessness:

"I don't think I will wait for Catherson," he said, "I can see him tomorrow, just as well."

"Well, that's too bad," drawled Randerson. "After waitin' this long, too! But I reckon you're right; it wouldn't be no use waitin'. I'll go too, I reckon. We'll ride to the Flyin' W together."

"I don't want to force my company on you, Randerson," laughed Masten nervously. "Besides, I had thought of taking the river trail — back toward Lazette, you know."

Randerson looked at him with a cold smile. "The Lazette trail suits me too," he said; "we'll go that way."

Masten looked at him again. The smile on Randerson's face was inscrutable. And now the pallor left Masten's cheeks and was succeeded by a color that burned. For he now was convinced and frightened. He heard Randerson speaking to Hagar, and so gentle was his voice that it startled him, so great was the contrast between it and the slumbering threat in his eyes and manner:

"Me an' Masten is goin' to make a short cut over to where his horse is, Hagar; we've changed our minds about goin' to the shack with you. We've decided that we're goin' to talk over that business that he come here about — not botherin' your dad with it." His lips straightened at the startled, dreading look that sprang into her eyes. "Dad ain't goin' to know, girl," he assured her gravely. "I'd never tell him. You go back to the shack an' pitch into your work, sort of forgettin' that you ever saw Mr. Masten. For he's goin' away tonight, an' he ain't comin' back."

Hagar covered her face with her hands and sank into the grass beside the path, crying.

"By God, Randerson!" blustered Masten, "what do you mean? This is going too —"

A look silenced him — choked the words in his

throat, and he turned without protest, at Randerson's jerk of the head toward the ford, and walked without looking back, Randerson following on Patches.

When they reached the narrow path that led to the crossing, just before entering the brush Randerson looked back. Hagar was still lying in the grass near the path. A patch of sunlight shone on her, and so clear was the light that Randerson could plainly see the spasmodic movement of her shoulders. His teeth clenched tightly, and the muscles of his face corded as they had done in the Flying W ranchhouse the day that Aunt Martha had told him of Pickett's attack on Ruth.

He watched silently while Masten got on his horse, and then, still silent, he followed as Masten rode down the path, across the river, through the break in the canyon wall and up the slope that led to the plains above. When they reached a level space in some timber that fringed the river, Masten attempted to urge his horse through it, but was brought to a halt by Randerson's voice:

"We'll get off here, Masten."

Masten turned, his face red with wrath.

"Look here, Randerson," he bellowed; "this ridiculous nonsense has gone far enough. I know,

now, that you were spying on us. I don't know why, unless you'd selected the girl yourself — ”

“ That's ag'in you too,” interrupted Randerson coldly. “ You're goin' to pay.”

“ You're making a lot of fuss about the girl,” sneered Masten. “ A man — ”

“ You're a heap careless with words that you don't know the meanin' of,” said Randerson. “ We don't raise men out here that do things like you do. An' I expect you're one in a million. They all can't be like you, back East; if they was, the East would go to hell plenty rapid. Get off your horse! ”

Masten demurred, and Randerson's big pistol leaped into his hand. His voice came at the same instant, intense and vibrant:

“ It don't make no difference to me *how* you get off! ”

He watched Masten get down, and then he slid to the ground himself, the pistol still in hand, and faced Masten, with only three or four feet of space separating them.

Masten had been watching him with wide, fearing eyes, and at the menace of his face when he dismounted Masten shrank back a step.

“ Good Heavens, man, do you mean to shoot

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me?" he said, the words faltering and scarcely audible.

"I reckon shootin' would be too good for you." Again Randerson's face had taken on that peculiar stony expression. Inexorable purpose was written on it; what he was to do he was in no hurry to be about, but it would be done in good time.

"I ain't never claimed to be no angel," he said. "I reckon I'm about the average, an' I've fell before temptation same as other men. But I've drawed the line where you've busted over it. Mebbe if it was some other girl, I wouldn't feel it like I do about Hagar. But when I tell you that I've knowed that girl for about five years, an' that there wasn't a mean thought in her head until you brought your dirty carcass to her father's shack, an' that to me she's a kid in spite of her long dresses and her newfangled furbelows, you'll understand a heap about how I feel right now. Get your paws up, for I'm goin' to thrash you so bad that your own mother won't know you — if she's so misfortunate as to be alive to look at you! After that, you're goin' to hit the breeze out of this country, an' if I ever lay eyes on you ag'in I'll go gunnin' for you!"

While he had been speaking he had holstered

the pistol, unstrapped his cartridge belt and let guns and belt fall to the ground. Then without warning he drove a fist at Masten's face.

The Easterner dodged the blow, evaded him, and danced off, his face alight with a venomous joy. For the dreaded guns were out of Randerson's reach, he was a fair match for Randerson in weight, though Randerson towered inches above him; he had had considerable experience in boxing at his club in the East, and he had longed for an opportunity to avenge himself for the indignity that had been offered him at Calamity. Besides, he had a suspicion that Ruth's refusal to marry before the fall round-up had been largely due to a lately discovered liking for the man who was facing him.

"I fancy you'll have your work cut out for you, you damned meddler!" he sneered as he went in swiftly, with a right and left, aimed at Randerson's face.

The blows landed, but seemingly had no effect, for Randerson merely gritted his teeth and pressed forward. In his mind was a picture of a girl whom he had "dawdled" on his knee — a "kid" that he had played with, as a brother might have played with a younger sister.

CHAPTER XII

THE RUSTLERS

AT about the time Randerson was crossing the river near the point where the path leading to Catherson's shack joined the Lazette trail, Ruth Harkness was loping her pony rapidly toward him. They passed each other within a mile, but both were unconscious of this fact, for Randerson was riding in the section of timber that he had entered immediately after crossing the river, and Ruth was concealed from his view by a stretch of intervening brush and trees.

Ruth had been worried more than she would have been willing to admit, over the presence of Chavis and his two men in the vicinity, and that morning after she had questioned a puncher about the former Flying W foreman, she had determined to ride down the river for the purpose of making a long distance observation of the "shack" the puncher and Randerson had mentioned as being inhabited by Chavis. That determination had not been acted upon until after dinner, however, and

it was nearly two o'clock when she reached the ford where she had passed Randerson.

The puncher had told her that Chavis' shack was about fifteen miles distant from the Flying W ranchhouse, and situated in a little basin near the river, which could be approached only by riding down a rock-strewn and dangerous declivity. She had no intention of risking the descent; she merely wanted to view the place from afar, and she judged that from the edge of a plateau, which the puncher had described to her, she would be able to see very well.

When she passed the ford near the Lazette trail, she felt a sudden qualm of misgiving, for she had never ridden quite that far alone—the ford was about ten miles from the ranchhouse—but she smiled at the sensation, conquering it, and continued on her way, absorbed in the panoramic view of the landscape.

At a distance of perhaps a mile beyond the ford she halted the pony on the crest of a low hill and looked about her. The country at this point was broken and rocky; there was much sand; the line of hills, of which the one on which her pony stood was a part, were barren and uninviting. There was much cactus. She made a grimace of abhor-

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rence at a clump that grew near her in an arid stretch, and then looked beyond it at a stretch of green. Far away on a gentle slope she saw some cattle, and looking longer, she observed a man on a horse. One of the Flying W men, of course, she assured herself, and felt more secure.

She rode on again, following a ridge, the pony stepping gingerly. Another half mile and she urged the pony down into a slight depression where the footing was better. The animal made good progress here, and after a while they struck a level, splotched with dry bunch-grass, which rustled noisily under the tread of the pony's hoofs.

It was exhilarating here, for presently the level became a slope, and the slope merged into another level which paralleled the buttes along the river, and she could see for miles on the other side of the stream, a vista of plain and hills and mountains and forest so alluring in its virgin wildness; so vast, big, and silent a section that it awed her.

When she saw the sun swimming just above the peaks of some mountains in the dim distance, she began to have some doubts of the wisdom of making the trip, but she pressed on, promising herself that she would have a brief look at the shack and the basin, and then immediately return. She

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had expected to make much better time than she had made. Also, she had not anticipated that a fifteen-mile ride would tire her so. But she believed that it was not the ride so far, but the prospect of another fifteen-mile ride to return, that appalled her — for she had ridden much since her coming to the Flying W, and was rather hardened to it. In one of his letters to her, her uncle had stated that his men often rode sixty miles in a day, and that he remembered one ride of ninety miles, which a cowpuncher had made with the same pony in twenty-two hours of straight riding. He had told her that the tough little plains pony could go any distance that its rider was able to “ fork ” it. She believed that, for the little animal under her had never looked tired when she had ridden him to the ranchhouse at the end of a hard day.

But these recollections did not console her, and she urged the pony on, into a gallop that took her over the ground rapidly.

At last, as she was swept around a bend in the plateau, she saw spreading beneath her a little valley, green-carpeted, beautiful. A wood rose near the river, and at its edge she saw what she had come to see — Chavis' shack.

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And now she realized that for all the knowledge that a look at Chavis' shack would give her, she might as well have stayed at the Flying W. She didn't know just what she had expected to see when she got here, but what she did see was merely the building, a small affair with a flat roof, the spreading valley itself, and several steers grazing in it.

There were no other signs of life. She got off the pony and walked to the edge of the plateau, discovering that the valley was much shallower than she thought it would be, and that at her side, to the left, was the declivity that the puncher had told her about. She leaned over the edge and looked at it.

It was not so steep as she had expected when listening to the puncher's description of it. But she thought it looked dangerous. At the point from which she viewed it, it was not more than fifteen or twenty feet below her. It cut into the plateau, running far back and doubling around toward her, and the stretch below her, that was within range of her eyes, was almost level. The wall of the cut on which she stood was ragged and uneven, with some scraggly brush thrusting out between the crevices of rocks, and about ten feet

down was a flat rock, like a ledge, that projected several feet out over the level below.

She was about to turn, for she had seen all she cared to see, when an impulse of curiosity urged her to crane her neck to attempt to peer around a shoulder of the cut where it doubled back. She started and turned pale, not so much from fright as with surprise, for she saw a horse's head projecting around the shoulder of the cut, and the animal was looking directly at her. As she drew back, her breath coming fast, the animal whinnied gently.

Almost instantly, she heard a man's voice:

"My cayuse is gettin' tired of loafin', I reckon."

Ruth held her breath. The voice seemed to come from beneath her feet — she judged that it really had come from beneath the rock that projected from the wall of the cut below her. And it was Chavis' voice!

Of course, he would not be talking to himself, and therefore there must be another man with him. At the risk of detection, and filled with an overwhelming curiosity to hear more she kneeled at the edge of the cut and listened intently, first making sure that the horse she had seen could not see her.

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"I reckon Linton didn't pull it off — or them Flyin' W guys are stickin' close to the herd," said another voice. "He ought to have been here an hour ago."

"Linton ain't no rusher," said Chavis. "We'll wait."

There was a silence. Then Chavis spoke again:

"Flyin' W stock is particular easy to run off. Did I tell you? B—— told me" — Ruth did not catch the name, she thought it might have been Bennet, or Ben — "that the girl had give orders that anyone ketched runnin' off Flyin' W stock wasn't to be hung!" Ruth heard him chuckle. "Easy boss, eh, Kester?" He sneered. "Ketch that damned Flyin' W outfit hangin' anybody!"

Kester was one of the men who had quit the day that Ruth had met Randerson, when the latter had been riding in for the money due them. It did not surprise Ruth to discover that Kester was with Chavis, for Randerson had told her what might be expected of him. Linton was the other man.

Nor did it surprise Ruth to hear Chavis talking of stealing the Flying W stock. But it angered

her to discover that her humane principles were being ridiculed; she was so incensed at Chavis that she felt she could remain to hear him no longer, and she got up, her face red, her eyes flashing, to go to her pony.

But the pony was nowhere in sight. She remembered now, her heart sinking with a sudden, vague fear, that she had neglected to trail the reins over the animal's head, as she had been instructed to do by the puncher who had gentled the pony for her; he had told her that no western horse, broken by an experienced rider, would stray with a dragging rein.

She gave a quick, frightened glance around. She could see clearly to the broken section of country through which she had passed some time before, and her glance went to the open miles of grass land that stretched south of her. The pony had not gone that way, either. Trembling from a sudden weakness, but driven by the urge of stern necessity, she advanced cautiously to the edge of the cut again and looked over.

Her pony was standing on the level below her, almost in front of the rock under which had been Chavis and Kester! It had evidently just gone down there, for at the instant she looked over the

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edge of the cut she saw Chavis and Kester running toward it, muttering with surprise.

For one wild, awful instant, Ruth felt that she would faint, for the world reeled around her in dizzying circles. A cold dread that seized her senses helped her to regain control of herself presently, however, and scarcely breathing she stole behind some dense weeds at the edge of the cut, murmuring a prayer of thankfulness for their presence.

What Chavis and Kester had said upon seeing the pony, she had not heard. But now she saw crafty smiles on their faces; Chavis' was transfigured by an expression that almost drew a cry of horror from her. Through the weeds she could see their forms, and even hear the subdued exclamation from Chavis:

"It's the girl's cayuse, sure. I'd know it if I saw it in the Cannibal islands. I reckon she's been snoopin' around here somewheres, an' it's sloped! Why, Kester!" he cried, standing erect and drawing great, long breaths, his eyes blazing with passion as for an instant she saw them as they swept along the edge of the cut, "I'd swing for a kiss from them lips of hers!"

"You're a fool!" declared Kester. "Let the

women alone! I never knowed a man to monkey with one yet, that he didn't get the worst of it."

Chavis paid no attention to this remonstrance. He seized Ruth's pony by the bridle and began to lead it up the slope toward the plateau. Kester laid a restraining hand on his arm. He spoke rapidly; he seemed to have become, in a measure, imbued with the same passion that had taken possession of Chavis.

"Leave the cayuse here; she'll be huntin' for it, directly; she'll come right down here. Give her time."

Chavis, however, while he obeyed the suggestion about leaving the pony where it was, did not follow Kester's suggestion about waiting, but began to run up the slope toward the plateau, scrambling and muttering. And Kester, after a short instant of silent contemplation, followed him.

Ruth no longer trembled. She knew that if she was to escape from the two men she would have to depend entirely upon her own wit and courage, and in this crisis she was cool and self-possessed. She waited until she saw the two men vanish behind the shoulder of the cut where she had seen the horse's head, and then she

clambered over the edge of the wall, grasping some gnarled branches, and letting herself slide quickly down. In an instant she felt her feet come in contact with the flat rock under which the men had been when she had first heard them talking. It seemed a great distance to the ground from the rock, but she took the jump bravely, not even shutting her eyes. She landed on all fours and pitched headlong, face down, in the dust, but was up instantly and running toward her pony.

Seizing the bridle, she looped it through her arm, and then, pulling at the animal, she ran to where the horses of the two men stood, watching her, and snorting with astonishment and fright. With hands that trembled more than a little, she threw the reins over their heads, so that they might not drag, and then, using the quirt, dangling from her wrist by a rawhide thong, she turned their heads toward the declivity and lashed them furiously. She watched them as they went helter-skelter, down into the valley, and then with a smile that might have been grim if it had not been so quavering, she mounted her own animal and rode it cautiously up the slope toward the plateau.

As she reached the plateau, her head rising above its edge, she saw that Chavis and Kester were a good quarter of a mile from her and running toward some timber a few hundred yards beyond them.

With a laugh that was almost derisive, Ruth whipped her pony and sent it flying over the plateau at an angle that took her almost directly away from the running men. She had been riding only a minute or two, however, when she heard a shout, and saw that the men had stopped and were facing in her direction, waving their hands at her. They looked grotesque — like jumping jacks — in the sudden twilight that had fallen, and she could not withhold a smile of triumph. It did not last long, for she saw the men begin to run again, this time toward the cut, and she urged her pony to additional effort, fearful that the men might gain their ponies and overtake her.

And now that the men were behind her, she squared her pony toward the trail over which she had ridden to come here, determined to follow it, for she felt that she knew it better than any other.

The pony ran well, covering the ground with long, agile jumps. For about two miles she held

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it to its rapid pace, and then, looking backward for the first time she saw the plateau, vast, dark and vacant, behind her, and she drew the pony down, for she had come to the stretch of broken country and realized that she must be careful.

She shuddered as she looked at the darkening world in front of her. Never had it seemed so dismal, so empty, and at the same time so full of lurking danger. The time which precedes the onrush of darkness is always a solemn one; it was doubly solemn to Ruth, alone, miles from home, with a known danger behind her and unknown dangers awaiting her.

Fifteen miles! She drew a long breath as the pony scampered along; anxiously she scanned the plains to the south and in front of her for signs of Flying W cattle or men. The cattle and horseman that she had previously seen, far over on the slope, had vanished, and it looked so dismal and empty over there that she turned her head and shivered.

There seemed to be nothing in front of her but space and darkness. She wondered, gulping, whether Uncle Jepson and Aunt Martha were worried about her. They would be, of course, for she had never stayed like this before. But, she

thought, with a pulse of joy, they would be lighting the lamps presently, and when she got to the big level beyond the ford, she would be able to see the lights, and the sight of them would make her feel better. She had never realized before how companionable a horse felt, and as her pony ran on, she began to give some attention to his work, noting how his muscles rippled and contracted, how his sides heaved, with what regularity his legs moved. Involuntarily, she felt of his shoulder — it was moist, and the muscles under the smooth hair writhed like living things. She laughed, almost hysterically, for the touch made her feel that she was not alone — she was with the most faithful of man's friends, and she knew that the little animal under her would do his best for her — would run himself to death in her service, if she insisted.

She had a glorious start over her pursuers. They would never catch her. Twice, after she entered the broken stretch she looked back, but could see no sign of them. She did not know that at that moment Chavis and Kester, enraged and disgusted over the trick she had played on them, were riding slowly through the valley toward their shack.

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She was almost through the broken stretch when the pony stumbled. She pulled quickly on the reins, and the pony straightened. But instantly she felt its forelegs stiffen, felt it slide; the thought came to her that it must have slid on a flat rock or a treacherous stretch of lava. It struggled like a cat, to recover its balance, grunting and heaving with the effort, but went down, finally, sideways, throwing her out of the saddle.

She had anticipated the fall and had got her feet out of the stirrups, and she alighted standing, braced for the shock. Her left foot struck the top of a jagged rock, slipped, doubled under her, and she felt a sharp, agonizing pain in the ankle. For a moment she paid no attention to it, however, being more concerned for the pony, but when she noted that the animal had got up, seemingly none the worse for the fall, she suddenly realized that the ankle pained her terribly, and she hopped over to a flat rock and sat on it, to examine the injury. She worked the ankle rapidly back and forth, each movement bringing tears to her eyes. She had almost forgotten about her pursuers, and when she thought of them she got up and limped toward the pony,

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which had wandered a little away from where it had fallen.

And now the pony, which had performed so nobly for her during the miles she had ridden to reach this spot, suddenly seemed determined to undo all his service by yielding to a whim to avoid capture.

She tried threats, flattery, cajolery. Twice more she hobbled painfully near him, and each time he unconcernedly walked away. The third time, he allowed her to come very close, and just when she felt that success was very near, he snorted with pretended fright, wheeled, and slashed out with both hoofs at her and galloped off a full quarter of a mile. She could see him standing and looking at her, his ears erect, before the darkness blotted him from view altogether.

She tried again, groping her way painfully over rocks, slipping, stumbling, holding her breath from fear of snakes — but she could not find the pony. And then, white, shaking, clammy from her dread of the darkness, the awesome silence, and the possibility of Chavis and Kester finding her here, she groped blindly until she found a big rock rising high above its fellows, and after a struggle during which she tore the skin

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from her hands and knees, she climbed to its top and crouched on it, shuddering and crying. And she thought of Randerson; of his seriousness and his earnestness when he had said:

“I reckon you don’t know hate or fear or desperation. . . . Out here things run loose, an’ if you stay here long enough, some day you’ll meet them an’ recognize them for your own — an’ you’ll wonder how you ever got along without them.”

Well, she hated now; she hated everything — the country included — with a bitterness that, she felt, would never die. And she had felt fear, too, and desperation. She felt them now, and more, she felt a deep humility, and she felt a genuine respect for Randerson — a respect which more than counterbalanced her former repugnance toward him for the killing of Pickett. For she knew that a while ago, if she had had a pistol with her, she would have killed Chavis and Kester without hesitation.

CHAPTER XIII

THE FIGHT

AT about the time that Chavis and Kester had discovered Ruth's pony and had clambered up the slope in search of the girl, the two figures on the timber-fringed level near the break in the canyon wall were making grotesque shadows as they danced about in the dying sunlight.

Masten's science had served him well. He had been able, so far, to evade many of Randerson's heavy blows, but some of them had landed. They had hurt, too, and had taken some of the vigor out of their target, though Masten was still elusive as he circled, with feet that dragged a little, feinting and probing for openings through which he might drive his fists.

A great many of his blows had reached their mark also. Randerson's face was covered with livid lumps and welts. But he seemed not to mind them, to be unconscious of them, for on his lips was still the dogged smile that had reached them

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soon after the fight had started, and in his eyes was the same look of cold deliberation and unrelenting purpose.

He had spoken no word since the fight began; he had taken Masten's heaviest punches without sign or sound to indicate that they had landed, always crowding forward, carrying the battle to his adversary, refusing to yield a step when to yield meant to evade punishment. Passion, deep and gripping, had made him for the moment an insensate automaton; he was devoid of any feeling except a consuming desire to punish the despoiler of his "kid."

But he was holding this passion in check; he was its master — it had not mastered him; he had made it a vassal to his deliberation. To have unleashed it all at once would have made him too eager, would have weakened him. He had chosen this punishment for Masten, and he would see that it was sufficient.

But, as Randerson had well known, Masten was no mean opponent. He stepped in and out rapidly, his blows lacking something in force through his inability to set himself. But he landed more often than Randerson; he blocked and covered cleverly; he ducked blows that would have

ended the fight had they struck him with their full force.

Masten had been full of confidence when the fight started. Some of that confidence had gone now. He was beginning to realize that he could not beat Randerson with jabs and stinging counters that hurt without deadening the flesh where they struck; nor could he hope to wear the Westerner down and finally finish him. And with this realization came a pulse of fear. He began to take more risks, to set himself more firmly on his feet in order to give his blows greater force when they landed. For he felt his own strength waning, and he knew what the end would be, should he no longer be able to hold Randerson off.

He went in now with a left jab, and instead of dancing back to avoid Randerson's counter, he covered with the left, swiftly drawn back from the jab, and hooked his right to Randerson's face. The blow landed heavily on Randerson's jaw, shaking him from head to foot. But he shook his head as though to dissipate the effect of it, and came after Masten grimly. Again Masten tried the maneuver, and the jab went home accurately, with force. But when he essayed to

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drive in the right, it was blocked, and Randerson's right, crooked, rigid, sent with the force of a battering ram, landed fairly on Masten's mouth, with deadening, crushing effect.

It staggered Masten, sent him back several feet, and his legs shook under him, sagging limply. His lips, where the blow had landed, were smashed, gaping hideously, red-stained. Randerson was after him relentlessly. Masten dared not clinch, for no rules of boxing governed this fight, and he knew that if he accepted rough and tumble tactics he would be beaten quickly. So he trusted to his agility, which, though waning, answered well until he recovered from the effects of the blow.

And then, with the realization that he was weakening, that the last blow had hurt him badly, came to Masten the sickening knowledge that Randerson was fighting harder than ever. He paid no attention to Masten's blows, not even attempting to fend them off, but bored in, swinging viciously. His blows were landing now; they left deadened flesh and paralyzed muscles as marks of their force.

Masten began to give way. Half a dozen times he broke ground, or slipped to one side or

the other. It was unavailing. Blows were coming at him now from all angles, ripping, tearing, crashing blows that seemed to increase in force as the fight went on. One of them caught Masten just below the ear on the right side. He reeled and went to his haunches, and dizzy, nauseated, he sat for an instant, trying to fix the world correctly in his vision, for it was all awry — trees, the plains, himself — all were dancing. Dimly he sensed the form of Randerson looming over him. He still was able to grasp the danger that menaced him, and reeling, he threw himself headlong, to escape Randerson, landing on his side on the ground, and with an inarticulate shriek of fury, he pulled the small caliber pistol from his hip pocket, aimed it at the shadowy form of his adversary and pressed the trigger.

And then it seemed that an avalanche had struck him; that he was whirled along by it, then buried under it.

Evidently he had been buried for a long time, for when he opened his eyes the dense blackness of the Western night had descended. He felt a dull, heavy pain in his right wrist, and he raised it — it seemed to have been crushed. He laid the hand down again, with a groan, and then he

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heard a voice. Looking up, he saw the shadowy figure of his conqueror standing over him.

"I reckon I've handed it to you pretty bad," said Randerson. "But you had it comin' to you. If you hadn't tried to play the skunk at the last minute, you'd have got off easier. I reckon your hand ain't so active as it's been — I had to pretty near stamp it off of you — you would keep pullin' the trigger of that pop-gun. Do you reckon you c'n get up now, an' get on your horse?"

Masten felt himself lifted; he did not resist. Then he felt the saddle under him; he made an effort and steadied himself. Then, still only half conscious he rode, reeling in the saddle, toward a light that he saw in the distance, which, he dimly felt, must come from the Flying W ranchhouse

CHAPTER XIV

THE ROCK AND THE MOONLIGHT

RANDERSON did not leave the scene of the fight immediately. He stood for a long time, after buckling on his belt and pistols, looking meditatively toward the break in the canyon beyond which was Catherson's shack.

"Did the dresses have anything to do with it?" he asked himself, standing there in the darkness. "New dresses might have — puttin' foolish notions in her head. But I reckon the man —" He laughed grimly. He had thought it all over before, back there on the path when he had been talking to Masten and Hagar. He reflected again on it now. "Lookin' it square in the face, it's human nature. We'll allow that. We'll say a man has feelin's. But a man ought to have sense, too — or he ain't a man. If Masten was a boy, now, not realizin', there'd be excuses. But he's wised up. . . . If his intentions had been honorable — but he's engaged to Ruth, an' they couldn't. I reckon he'll pull his

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freight now. Catherson would sure muss him up some."

He mounted his pony and rode toward the Flying W ranchhouse. Halfway there he passed Masten. The moon had risen; by its light he could see the Easterner, who had halted his horse and was standing beside it, watching him. Randerson paid no heed to him.

"Thinkin' it over, I reckon," he decided, as he rode on. Looking back, when he reached the house, he saw that Masten was still standing beside his horse.

At the sound of hoof beats, Uncle Jepson came out on the porch and peered at the rider. Randerson could see Aunt Martha close behind him. Uncle Jepson was excited. He started off the porch toward Randerson.

"It's Randerson, mother!" he called shrilly back to Aunt Martha, who was now on the porch.

In a brief time Randerson learned that Ruth had gone riding — alone — about noon, and had not returned. Randerson also discovered that the girl had questioned a puncher who had ridden in — asking him about Chavis' shack and the basin. Randerson's face, red from the blows that had landed on it, paled quickly.

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"I reckon she's takin' her time about comin' in," he said. "Mebbe her cayuse has broke a leg — or somethin'." He grinned at Uncle Jepson. "I expect there ain't nothin' to worry about. I'll go look for her."

He climbed slowly into the saddle, and with a wave of the hand to the elderly couple rode his pony down past the bunkhouse at a pace that was little faster than a walk. He urged Patches to slightly greater speed as he skirted the corral fence, but once out on the plains he loosened the reins, spoke sharply to the pony and began to ride in earnest.

Patches responded nobly to the grim note in his master's voice. With stretching neck and flying hoofs he swooped with long, smooth undulations that sent him, looking like a splotted streak, splitting the night. He ran at his own will, his rider tall and loose in the saddle, speaking no further word, but thinking thoughts that narrowed his eyes, made them glint with steely hardness whenever the moonlight struck them, and caused his lips to part, showing the clenched teeth between them, and shoved his chin forward with the queer set that marks the fighting man.

For he did not believe that Ruth's pony had

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broken a leg. She had gone to see Chavis' shack, and Chavis —

One mile, two, three, four; Patches covered them in a mad riot of recklessness. Into depressions, over rises, leaping rocks and crashing through chaparral clumps, scaring rattlers, scorpions, toads, and other denizens to wild flight, he went, with not a thought for his own or his rider's safety, knowing from the ring in his master's voice that speed, and speed alone, was wanted from him.

After a five mile run he was pulled down. He felt the effects of the effort, but he was well warmed to his work now and he loped, though with many a snort of impatience and toss of the head, by which he tried to convey to his master his eagerness to be allowed to have his will.

On the crest of a hill he was drawn to a halt, while Randerson scanned the country around him. Then, when the word came again to go, he was off with a rush and a snort of delight, as wildly reckless as he had been when he had discovered what was expected of him.

They flashed by the ford near the Lazette trail; along a ridge, the crest of which was hard and barren, making an ideal speedway; they sank

into a depression with sickening suddenness, went out of it with a clatter, and then went careening over a level until they reached a broken stretch where speed would mean certain death to both.

Patches was determined to risk it, but suddenly he was pulled in and forced to face the other way. And what he saw must have made him realize that his wild race was ended, for he deflated his lungs shrilly, and relaxed himself for a rest.

Randerson had seen her first. She was sitting on the top of a gigantic rock not more than fifty feet from him; she was facing him, had evidently been watching him; and in the clear moonlight he could see that she was pale and frightened — frightened at him, he knew, fearful that he might not be a friend.

This impression came to him simultaneously with her cry — shrill with relief and joy: "Oh, it's Patches! It's Randerson!" And then she suddenly stiffened and stretched out flat on the top of the rock.

He lifted her down and carried her, marveling at her lightness, to a clump of bunch-grass near by, and worked, trying to revive her, until she struggled and sat up. She looked once at him,

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her eyes wide, her gaze intent, as though she wanted to be sure that it was really he, and then she drew a long, quavering breath and covered her face with her hands.

"Oh," she said; "it was horrible!" She uncovered her face and looked up at him. "Why," she added, "I have been here since before dark! And it must be after midnight, now!"

"It's about nine. Where's your horse?"

"Gone," she said dolorously. "He fell — over there — and threw me. I saw Chavis — and Kester — over on the mesa. I thought they would come after me, and I hurried. Then my pony fell. I've hurt my ankle — and I couldn't catch him — my pony, I mean; he was too obstinate — I could have killed him! I couldn't walk, you know — my ankle, and the snakes — and the awful darkness, and — Oh, Randerson," she ended, with a gulp of gratitude, "I never was so glad to see you — anybody — in my life!"

"I reckon it *was* kind of lonesome for you out here alone with the snakes, an' the dark, an' things."

She was over her scare now, he knew — as he was over his fears for her, and he grinned with a humor brought on by a revulsion of feeling.

"I reckon mebbe the snakes would have bothered you some," he added, "for they're natural mean. But I reckon the moon made such an awful darkness on purpose to scare you."

"How can you joke about it?" she demanded resentfully.

"I'm sorry, ma'am," he said with quick contrition. "You see, I was glad to find you. An' you're all right now, you know."

"Yes, yes," she said, quickly forgiving. "I suppose I *am* a coward."

"Why, no, ma'am, I reckon you ain't. Anybody sittin' here alone, a woman, especial, would likely think a lot of curious thoughts. They'd seem real. I reckon it was your ankle, that kept you from walkin'."

"It hurts terribly," she whispered, and she felt of it, looking at him plaintively. "It is so swollen I can't get my boot off. And the leather seems like an iron band around it." She looked pleadingly at him. "Won't you please take it off?"

His embarrassment was genuine and deep.

"Why, I reckon I can, ma'am," he told her. "But I ain't never had a heap of experience—" His pause was eloquent, and he finished lamely

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"with boots — boots, that is, that was on swelled ankles."

"Is it necessary to have experience?" she returned impatiently.

"Why, I reckon not, ma'am." He knelt beside her and grasped the boot, giving it a gentle tug. She cried out with pain and he dropped the boot and made a grimace of sympathy. "I didn't mean to hurt you, ma'am."

"I know you didn't" — peevishly. "Oh," she added as he took the boot in hand again, this time giving it a slight twist; "men are *such* awkward creatures!"

"Why, I reckon they are, ma'am. That is, one, in particular. There's times when I can't get my own boots on." He grinned, and she looked icily at him.

"Get hold of it just above the ankle, please," she instructed evenly and drew the hem of her skirt tightly. "There!" she added as he seized the limb gingerly, "now pull!"

He did as he had been bidden. She shrieked in agony and jerked the foot away, and he stood up, his face reflecting some of the pain and misery that shone in hers.

"It's awful, ma'am," he sympathized. "Over

at the Diamond H, one of the boys got his leg broke, last year, ridin' an outlaw, or tryin' to ride him, which ain't quite the same thing — an' we had to get his boot off before we could set the break. Why, ma'am; we had to set on his head to keep him from scarin' all the cattle off the range, with his screechin'."

She looked at him with eyes that told him plainly that no one was going to sit on *her* head — and that she would "screech" if she chose. And then she spoke to him with bitter sarcasm:

"Perhaps if you *tried* to do something, instead of standing there, telling me something that happened *ages* ago, I wouldn't have to sit here and endure this awful m-m-misery!"

The break in her voice brought him on his knees at her side. "Why, I reckon it *must* hurt like the devil, ma'am." He looked around helplessly.

"Haven't you got something that you might take it off with?" she demanded tearfully.

"Haven't you got a knife?"

He reddened guiltily. "I clean forgot it ma'am." He laughed with embarrassment. "I expect I'd never do for a doctor, ma'am; I'm so excited an' forgetful. An' I recollect, now that

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you mention it, that we had to cut Hiller's boot off. That was the man I was tellin' you about. He — "

" Oh, dear," she said with heavy resignation, " I suppose you simply *must* talk! Do you *like* to see me suffer? "

" Why, shucks, I feel awful sorry for you, ma'am. I'll sure hurry."

While he had been speaking he had drawn out his knife, and with as much delicacy as the circumstances would permit, he accomplished the destruction of the boot. Then, after many admonitions for him to be careful, and numerous sharp intakings of her breath, the boot was withdrawn, showing her stockinged foot, puffed to abnormal proportions. She looked at it askance.

" Do you think it is b-broken?" she asked him, dreading.

He grasped it tenderly, discovered that the ankle moved freely, and after pressing it in several places, looked up at her.

" I don't think it's broke, ma'am. It's a bad sprain though, I reckon. I reckon it ought to be rubbed — so's to bring back the blood that couldn't get in while the boot was on."

The foot was rubbed, he having drawn off the stocking with as much delicacy as he had exhibited in taking off the boot. And then while Rander-son considerably withdrew under pretense of looking at Patches, the stocking was put on again. When he came back it was to be met with a request:

"Won't you please find my pony and bring him back?"

"Why, sure, ma'am." He started again for Patches, but halted and looked back at her. "You won't be scared again?"

"No," she said. And then: "But you'll hurry, won't you?"

"I reckon." He was in the saddle quickly, loping Patches to the crest of a hill near by in hopes of getting a view of the recreant pony. He got a glimpse of it, far back on the plains near some timber, and he was about to shout the news to Ruth, who was watching him intently, when he thought better of the notion and shut his lips.

Urging Patches forward, he rode toward Ruth's pony at a moderate pace. Three times during the ride he looked back. Twice he was able to see Ruth, but the third time he had swerved so that some bushes concealed him from

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her. He was forced to swerve still further to come up with the pony, and he noted that Ruth would never have been able to see her pony from her position.

It was more than a mile to where the animal stood, and curiously, as though to make amends for his previous bad behavior to Ruth, he came trotting forward to Randerson, whinnying gently.

Randerson seized the bridle, and grinned at the animal.

"I reckon I ought to lam you a-plenty, you miserable deserter," he said severely, "runnin' away from your mistress that-a-way. Is that the way for a respectable horse to do? You've got her all nervous an' upset — an' she sure roasted me. Do you reckon there's any punishment that'd fit what you done? Well, I reckon! You come along with me!"

Leading the animal, he rode Patches to the edge of the timber. There, unbuckling one end of the reins from the bit ring, he doubled them, passed them through a gnarled root, made a firm knot and left the pony tied securely. Then he rode off and looked back, grinning.

"You're lost, you sufferin' runaway. Only you don't know it."

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He loped Patches away and made a wide detour of the mesa, making sure that he appeared often on the sky line, so that he would be seen by Ruth. At the end of half an hour he rode back to where the girl was standing, watching him. He dismounted and approached her, standing before her, his expression one of grave worry.

"That outlaw of yours ain't anywhere in sight, ma'am," he said. "I reckon he's stampeded back to the ranchhouse. You sure you ain't seen him go past here?"

"No," she said, "unless he went way around, just after it got dark."

"I reckon that's what he must have done. Some horses is plumb mean. But you can't walk, you know," he added after a silence; "I reckon you'll have to ride Patches."

"You would have to walk, then," she objected. "And that wouldn't be fair!"

"Walkin' wouldn't bother me, ma'am." He got Patches and led him closer. She looked at the animal, speculatively.

"Don't you think he could carry both of us?" she asked.

He scrutinized Patches judicially. A light, which she did not see, leaped into his eyes.

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"Why, I didn't think of that. I reckon he could, ma'am. Anyway, we can try it, if you want to."

He led Patches still closer. Then, with much care, he lifted Ruth and placed her in the saddle, mounting behind her. Patches moved off.

After a silence which might have lasted while they rode a mile, Ruth spoke.

"My ankle feels very much easier."

"I'm glad of that, ma'am."

"Randerson," she said, after they had gone on a little ways further; "I beg your pardon for speaking to you the way I did, back there. But my foot *did* hurt terribly."

"Why, sure. I expect I deserved to get roasted."

Again there was a silence. Ruth seemed to be thinking deeply. At a distance that he tried to keep respectful, Randerson watched her, with worshipful admiration, noting the graceful disorder of her hair, the wisps at the nape of her neck. The delicate charm of her made him thrill with the instinct of protection. So strong was this feeling that when he thought of her pony, back at the timber, guilt ceased to bother him.

Ruth related to him the conversation she had

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overheard between Chavis and Kester, and he smiled understandingly at her.

"Do you reckon you feel as tender toward them now as you did before you found that out?"

"I don't know," she replied. "It made me angry to hear them talk like that. But as for hanging them — " She shivered. "There were times, tonight, though, when I thought hanging would be too good for them," she confessed.

"You'll shape up real western — give you time," he assured. "You'll be ready to take your own part, without dependin' on laws to do it for you — laws that don't reach far enough."

"I don't think I shall ever get your viewpoint," she declared.

"Well," he said, "Pickett was bound to try to get me. Do you think that if I'd gone to the sheriff at Las Vegas, an' told him about Pickett, he'd have done anything but poke fun at me? An' that word would have gone all over the country — that I was scared of Pickett — an' I'd have had to pull my freight. I had to stand my ground, ma'am. Mebbe I'd have been a hero if I'd have let him shoot me, but I wouldn't have been here any more to know about it. An' I'm plumb satisfied to be here, ma'am."

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"How did you come to hear about me not getting home?" she asked.

"I'd rode in to see Catherson. I couldn't see him — because he wasn't there. Then I come on over to the ranchhouse, an' Uncle Jepson told me about you not comin' in."

"Was Mr. Masten at the ranchhouse?"

He hesitated. Then he spoke slowly. "I didn't see him there, ma'am."

She evidently wondered why it had not been Masten that had come for her.

They were near the house when she spoke again:

"Did you have an accident today, Rander-son?"

"Why, ma'am?" he asked to gain time, for he knew that the moonlight had been strong enough, and that he had been close enough to her, to permit her to see.

"Your face has big, ugly, red marks on it, and the skin on your knuckles is all torn," she said.

"Patches throwed me twice, comin' after you, ma'am," he lied. "I plowed up the ground considerable. I've never knowed Patches to be so unreliable."

She turned in the saddle and looked full at him.

"That is strange," she said, looking ahead again.

"The men have told me that you are a wonderful horseman."

"The men was stretchin' the truth, I reckon," he said lightly.

"Anyway," she returned earnestly; "I thank you very much for coming for me."

She said nothing more to him until he helped her down at the edge of the porch at the ranch-house. And then, while Uncle Jepson and Aunt Martha were talking and laughing with pleasure at her return, she found time to say, softly to him:

"I really don't blame you so much -- about Pickett. I suppose it was necessary."

"Thank you, ma'am," he said gratefully.

He helped her inside, where the glare of the kerosene lamps fell upon him. He saw Uncle Jepson looking at him searchingly; and he caught Ruth's quick, low question to Aunt Martha, as he was letting her gently down in a chair:

"Where is Willard?"

"He came in shortly after dark," Aunt Martha told her. "Jep was talking to him, outside. He left a note for you. He told Jep that he was going over to Lazette for a couple of weeks, my dear."

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Randerson saw Ruth's frown. He also saw Aunt Martha looking intently through her glasses at the bruises on his face.

"Why, boy," she exclaimed, "what has happened to you?"

Randerson reddened. It was going to be harder for him to lie to Aunt Martha than to Ruth. But Ruth saved him the trouble.

"Randerson was thrown twice, riding out to get me," she explained.

"Throwed twice, eh?" said Uncle Jepson to Randerson, when a few minutes later he followed the range boss out on the porch. He grinned at Randerson suspiciously. "Throwed twice, eh?" he repeated. "Masten's face looks like some one had danced a jig on it. Huh! I cal'late that if you was throwed twice, Masten's horse must have *drug* him!"

"You ain't tellin' *her*!" suggested Randerson.

"You tell her anything *you* want to tell her, my boy," whispered Uncle Jepson. "An' if I don't miss my reckonin', she'll *listen* to you, some day."

CHAPTER XV

THE RUNAWAY COMES HOME

M ASTEN'S note to Ruth contained merely the information that he was going to Lazette, and that possibly he might not return for two weeks. He hinted that he would probably be called upon to go to Santa Fe on business, but if so he would apprise her of that by messenger. He gave no reason for his sudden leave-taking, or no explanation of his breach of courtesy in not waiting to see her personally. The tone of the note did not please Ruth. It had evidently been written hurriedly, on a sheet of paper torn from a pocket notebook. That night she studied it long, by the light from the kerosene lamp in her room, and finally crumpled it up and threw it from her. Then she sat for another long interval, her elbows on the top of the little stand that she used as a dressing table, her chin in her hands, staring with unseeing eyes into a mirror in front of her — or rather, at two faces that seemed to be reflected in the glass: Masten's and Randerson's.

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Next morning she got downstairs late, to find breakfast over and Randerson gone. Later in the morning she saw Uncle Jepson waving a hand to her from the corral, and she ran down there, to find her pony standing outside the fence, meek and docile. The bridle rein, knotted and broken, dangled in the dust at his head.

She took up the end with the knot in it.

"He's been tied!" she exclaimed. She showed Uncle Jepson the slip knot. And then she became aware of Aunt Martha standing beside her, and she showed it to her also. And then she saw a soiled blue neckerchief twisted and curled in the knot, and she examined it with wide eyes.

"Why, it's Randerson's!" she declared, in astonishment. "How on earth did it get here?"

And now her face crimsoned, for illumination had come to her. She placed the neckerchief behind her, with a quick hope that her relatives had not seen it, nor had paid any attention to her exclamation. But she saw Uncle Jepson grin broadly, and her face grew redder with his words:

"I cal'late the man who lost that blue bandanna wasn't a tol'able piece away when that knot was tied."

"Jep Coakley, you mind your own business!" rebuked Aunt Martha sharply, looking severely at Uncle Jepson over the rims of her spectacles.

"Don't you mind him, honey," she consoled, putting an arm around the girl as Uncle Jepson went away, chuckling. "Why, girl," she went on, smiling at Ruth's crimson face, "you don't blame him, do you? If you don't know he likes you, you've been blind to what I've been seeing for many days. Never mention to him that you know he tied the pony, dear. For he's a gentleman, in spite of that."

And obediently, though with cheeks that reddened many times during the process, and laughter that rippled through her lips occasionally, Ruth washed the neckerchief, folded it, to make creases like those which would have been in it had its owner been wearing it, then crumpled it, and stole to Randerson's room when she was sure that he was not there, and placed the neckerchief where its owner would be sure to find it.

She was filled with a delightful dread against the day when he would discover it, for she felt that he might remember where he had lost it, and thus become convinced that she knew of his duplicity. But many days passed and he did not

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come in. She did not know that on his way out to join the outfit the next morning he had noticed that he had lost the neckerchief, and that he remembered it flapping loose around his neck when he had gone toward the timber edge for her pony. He had searched long for it, without success, of course, and had finally ridden away, shaking his head, deeply puzzled over its disappearance.

Nor did Ruth know that on the day she had discovered the neckerchief dangling from the knot, Aunt Martha had spoken again to Uncle Jep concerning it.

"Jep Coakley," she said earnestly; "you like your joke, as well as any man. But if I ever hear of you mentioning anything to Randerson about that bandanna, I'll tweak your nose as sure as you're alive!"

CHAPTER XVI

TWO ARE TAUGHT LESSONS

THERE was one other thing that Ruth did not know—the rage that dwelt in Rander-son's heart against Chavis and Kester. He had shown no indication of it when she had related to him the story of her adventure with the men, nor did he mention it to any of his associates. There had been a time in his life when he would have brought the men to a quick and final accounting, for their offense was one that the laws governing human conduct in this country would not condone; but he was not the man he had been before the coming of Ruth; her views on the taking of human life—no matter what the provocation—were barriers that effectively restrained his desires.

Yet he could not permit Kester and Chavis to think they could repeat the offense with impunity. That would be an indication of impotence, of servile yielding to the feminine edict that had already gone forth, and behind which Chavis and his men were even now hiding—the decree of the

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Flying W owner that there should be no taking of human life. His lips twisted crookedly as on the morning of the day following his adventure with Ruth and the recreant pony he mounted his own animal and rode away from the outfit without telling any of them where he was going. Two or three hours later, in a little basin near the plateau where Ruth had overheard the men talking, Chavis and Kester were watching the crooked smile; their own faces as pale as Randerson's, their breath swelling their lungs as the threat of impending violence assailed them; their muscles rippling and cringing in momentary expectation of the rapid movement they expected — and dreaded; their hearts laboring and pounding. For they saw in the face of this man who had brought his pony to a halt within ten feet of them a decision to adhere to the principles that had governed him all his days, and they knew that a woman's order would not stay the retributive impulse that was gleaming in his eyes.

“We'll get to an understandin' before we quit here,” he said, his cold, alert eyes roving over them. “You've made one break, an' you're gettin' out of it because my boss ain't dead stuck on attendin' funerals. I reckon you know I ain't got

no such nice scruples, an' a funeral more or less won't set so awful heavy on my conscience. There's goin' to be more mourners requisitioned in this country damned sudden if women ain't goin' to be allowed range rights. I ain't passin' around no more warnin's, an' you two is talkin' mighty sudden or the mourners will be yowlin'. What's the verdict?"

Chavis sighed. "We wasn't meanin' no harm," he apologized, some color coming into his face again.

"An' you?" Randerson's level look confused Kester.

"I ain't travelin' that trail no more," he promised, his eyes shifting. He knew as well as Chavis that it was the only way. A word, spoken with a hint of belligerence, a single hostile movement, would have precipitated the clash they knew Randerson had come to force—a clash which they knew would end badly for them. For Randerson had chosen his position when halting Patches—it was strategic, and they knew his fingers were itching for the feel of his guns.

They saw the crooked smile fade from his lips; they curved with cold, amused contempt.

"Not runnin' no risks to speak of, eh?" he

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drawled. "Well, get goin'!" He lounged in the saddle, watching them as they rode away, not looking back. When they reached the far slope of the basin he turned Patches and sniffed disgustedly. Five minutes later he was at the crest of the back slope, riding toward the outfit, miles away.

It was an hour later that he observed a moving spot on the sky line. The distance was great, but something familiar in the lines of the figure—when he presently got near enough to see that the blot was a pony and rider—made his blood leap with eager anticipation; and he spoke sharply to Patches, sending him forward at a brisk lope.

He had seen some cattle near the rider; he had passed them earlier in the morning—lean, gaunt range steers that would bother a fast pony in a run if thoroughly aroused.

He saw that the rider had halted very close to one of the steers, and a look of concern flashed into his eyes.

"She oughtn't to do that!" he muttered. Unconsciously, his spurs touched Patches' flanks, and the little animal quickened his pace.

Randerson did not remove his gaze from the distant horse and rider. He rode for a quarter

of a mile in silence, his muscles slowly tensing as he watched.

"What's she doin' now?" he demanded of the engulfing space, as he saw the rider swing around in the saddle.

"Hell!" he snapped an instant later; "she's gettin' off her horse!" He raised his voice in a shout, that fell flat and futile on the dead desert air, and he leaned forward in the saddle and drove the spurs deep as he saw the range steer nearest the rider raise its head inquiringly and look toward the rider — for she had dismounted and was walking away from her horse at an angle that would take her very close to the steer.

Patches was running now, with the cat-like leaps peculiar to him, and his rider was urging him on with voice and spur and hand, his teeth set, his eyes burning with anxiety.

But the girl had not seen him. She was still moving away from her horse; too far away from it to return if the steer decided to charge her, and Randerson was still fully half a mile distant.

He groaned audibly as he saw the steer take a few tentative steps toward her, his head raised, tail erect, his long horns glinting in the white sunlight. Randerson knew the signs.

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"Good God!" he whispered; "can't she see what that steer is up to?"

It seemed she did, for she had halted and was facing the animal. For an instant there was no movement in the vast realm of space except the terrific thunder of Patches' hoofs as they spurned the hard alkali level over which he was running; the squeaking protests of the saddle leather, and Randerson's low voice as he coaxed the pony to greater speed. But Patches had reached the limit of effort, was giving his rider his last ounce of strength, and he closed the gap between himself and the girl with whirlwind rapidity.

But it seemed he would be too late. The girl had sensed her danger. She had caught the stealthy movement of the steer; she had glimpsed the unmistakable malignance of his blood-shot eyes, and had stood for an instant in the grip of a dumb, paralyzing terror. She had dismounted to gather some yellow blossoms of soapweed that had looked particularly inviting from the saddle, and too late she had become aware of the belligerent actions of the steer.

She realized now that she was too far from her pony to reach it in case the steer attacked her, but in the hope of gaining a few steps before the

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charge came she backed slowly, edging sidelong toward the pony.

She gained a considerable distance in this manner, for during the first few seconds of the movement the steer seemed uncertain and stood, swinging its head from side to side, pawing the sand vigorously.

The girl was thankful for the short respite, and she made the most of it. She had retreated perhaps twenty-five or thirty feet when the steer charged, bolting toward her with lowered head.

She had gone perhaps thirty or forty feet when Patches reached the scene. The girl saw the blur he made as he flashed past her—he had cut between her and the steer—so close to her that the thunder of his hoofs roared deafening in her ears, and the wind from his passing almost drew her off her balance as amazed, stunned, nerveless, she halted. She caught a glimpse of Randerson's profile as he swept into a circle and threw his rope. There must be no missing—there was none. The sinuous loop went out, fell over the steer's head. Thereafter there was a smother of dust in which the girl could see some wildly waving limbs. Outside of the smother she saw the pony swing off for a short distance and stiffen its legs. The rope

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attached to the pommel of the saddle grew taut as a bow string; there was an instant of strained suspense during which the pony's back arched until the girl thought it must surely break. It was over in an instant, though every detail was vividly impressed upon the girl's mind. For the cold terror that had seized her had fled with the appearance of Patches—she knew there could be no danger to her after that.

She watched the steer fall. He went down heavily, the impetus of his charge proving his undoing; he struck heavily on head and shoulder, grunting dismally, his hind quarters rising in the air, balancing there for an infinitesimal space and then following his head.

The rope stretched tighter; the girl saw Patches putting a steady pull on it. The loop had fallen around the steer's neck; she heard the animal cough for breath once, then its breath was cut off.

In this minute the girl's chief emotion was one of admiration for the pony. How accurate its movements in this crisis! How unerring its judgment! For though no word had been spoken—at least the girl heard none—the pony kept the rope taut, bracing against its burden as Randerson slid out of the saddle.

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The girl's interest left the pony and centered on its rider. Randerson was running toward the fallen steer, and though Ruth had witnessed this operation a number of times since her coming to the Flying W, she had never watched it with quite the interest with which she watched it now. It was all intensely personal.

Randerson had drawn a short piece of rope from a loop on the saddle when he had dismounted. It dangled from his hand as he ran toward the steer. In an instant he was bending over the beast, working at its hoofs, drawing the forehoofs and one hind hoof together, lashing them fast, twining the rope in a curious knot that, the girl knew from experience, would hold indefinitely.

Randerson straightened when his work was finished, and looked at Ruth. The girl saw that his face was chalk white. But his voice was sharp, and it rang like the beat of a hammer upon metal:

"Get on your horse!"

There was no refusing that voice, and Ruth turned and ran toward her pony, with something of the confusion and guilt that overtakes a recreant child scolded by its parent. She was scarcely in the saddle when she turned to watch Randerson.

He was pulling the loop from the steer's head.

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He coiled it, with much deliberation, returned to Patches and hung the rope from its hook. Then he walked slowly back to the steer.

The latter had been choked to unconsciousness, but was now reviving. With a quick jerk Rander-son removed the rope from its hoofs, retreating to Patches and swinging into the saddle, watching the movements of the steer.

The steer had got to its feet and stood with legs braced in sharp outward angles, trembling, its great head rolling from side to side, lowered almost to the dust, snorting breath into its lungs.

The girl was fascinated, but she heard Rander-son's voice again, flung at her this time:

"Get away from here — quick!"

She jerked on the reins, and the pony, wise with the wisdom of experience, knowing the danger that portended, bolted quickly, carrying her some distance before she succeeded in halting him.

When she turned to look back, there was a dust cloud near the spot where the steer had lain. In the cloud she saw the steer, Patches, and Rander-son. Patches and the steer were running — Patches slightly in advance. The pony was racing, dodging to the right and left, pursuing a zig-zag course that kept the steer bothered.

As the girl watched she found a vicious rage stealing over her, directed against the steer. Why didn't Randerson kill the beast, instead of running from it in that fashion? Somehow, she did not like to see Randerson in that role; it was far from heroic—it flavored of panic; it made her think of the panic that had gripped her a few minutes before, when she had retreated from the steer.

She watched the queer race go on for a few minutes, and then she saw an exhibition of roping that made her gasp. From a point fifteen or twenty feet in advance of the steer, Randerson threw his rope. He had twisted in the saddle, and he gave the lariat a quick flirt, the loop running out perpendicularly, like a rolling hoop, and not more than a foot from the ground, writhing, undulating, the circle constricting quickly, sinuously. The girl saw the loop topple as it neared the steer—it was much like the motion of a hoop falling. It met one of the steer's hoofs as it was flung outward; it grew taut; the rope straightened and Patches swung off to the right at an acute angle. He did not brace his legs, this time. This was a different game. He merely halted, turning his head and watching, with a well-I've-done-it-now

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expression of the eyes that would have brought a smile to the girl's face at any other time.

Again it was over in an instant; for the second time the steer turned a somersault. Again there followed a space during which there was no movement.

Then Randerson slacked the rope. It seemed to Ruth that Patches did this of his own accord. The steer scrambled to its feet, hesitated an instant, and then lunged furiously toward the tormenting horse and rider.

Patches snorted; Ruth was certain it was with disgust. He leaped — again the girl thought Randerson had no hand in the movement — directly toward the enraged steer, veering sharply as he neared it, and passing to its rear. For the third time the rope grew taut, and this time the pony braced itself and the steer went down with a thud that carried clearly and distinctly to the girl.

She thought the beast must be fatally injured, and felt that it richly deserved its fate. But after a period, during which Patches wheeled to face the beast, Randerson grinning coldly at it, the steer again scrambled to its feet.

This time it stood motionless, merely trembling a little. The fear of the rope had seized it; this

man-made instrument was a thing that could not be successfully fought. That, it seemed to the girl, was the lesson the steer had been taught from its experience. That it was the lesson Randerson had set out to teach the animal, the girl was certain. It explained Randerson's seeming panic; it made the girl accuse herself sharply for doubting him.

She watched the scene to its conclusion. The steer started off, shaking its head from side to side. Plainly, it wanted no more of this sort of work; the fight had all been taken out of it. Again the pony stiffened, and again the steer went down with a thud. This time, while it struggled on the ground, Randerson gave the rope a quick flirt, making undulation that ran from his hand to the loop around the steer's leg, loosening it. And when the beast again scrambled to its feet it trotted off, free, head and tail in the air, grunting with relief.

A few minutes later Randerson loped Patches toward her, coiling his rope, a grin on his face. He stopped before her, and his grin broadened.

"Range steers are sort of peculiar, ma'am," he said gently. "They're raised like that. They don't ever see no man around them unless he's

forkin' his pony. No cowpuncher with any sense goes to hoofin' it around a range steer—it ain't accordin' to the rules. Your range steer ain't used to seein' a man walkin'. On his pony he's safe—nine times out of ten. The other time a range steer will tackle a rider that goes to monkeyin' around him promiscuous. But they have to be taught manners, ma'am—the same as human bein's. That scalawag will recognize the rope now, ma'am, the same as a human outlaw will recognize the rope—or the law. Of course both will be outlaws when there's no rope or no law around, but — Why, ma'am," he laughed — "I'm gettin' right clever at workin' my jaw, ain't I? Are you headin' back to the Flyin' W? Because if you are, I'd be sort of glad to go along with you — if you'll promise you won't go to galivantin' around the country on foot no more. Not that *that* steer will tackle you again, ma'am — he's been taught *his* lesson. But there's others."

She laughed and thanked him. As they rode she considered his subtle reference to the law and the rope, and wondered if it carried any personal significance to anyone. Twice she looked at him for evidence of that, but could gain nothing from his face — suffused with quiet satisfaction.

CHAPTER XVII

THE TARGET

EARLIER in the morning, Ruth had watched Uncle Jepson and Aunt Martha ride away in the buckboard toward Lazette. She had stood on the porch, following them with her eyes until the buckboard had grown dim in her vision — a mere speck crawling over a sun-scorched earth, under a clear white sky in which swam a sun that for days had been blighting growing things. But on the porch of the ranchhouse it was cool.

Ruth was not cool. When the buckboard had finally vanished into the distance, with nothing left of it but a thin dust cloud that spread and disintegrated and at last settled down, Ruth walked to a rocker on the porch and sank into it, her face flushed, her eyes glowing with eager expectancy.

A few days before, while rummaging in a wooden box which had been the property of her uncle, William Harkness, she had come upon another box, considerably smaller, filled with

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cartridges. She had examined them thoughtfully, and at last, with much care and trepidation, had taken one of them, found Uncle Harkness' big pistol, removed the cylinder and slipped the cartridge into one of the chambers. It had fitted perfectly. Thereafter she had yielded to another period of thoughtfulness — longer this time.

A decision had resulted from those periods, for the day before, when a puncher had come in from the outfit, on an errand, she had told him to send Randerson in to the ranchhouse to her, on the following day. And she was expecting him now.

She had tried to dissuade Uncle Jep and Aunt Martha from making the trip to Lazette today, but, for reasons which she would not have admitted — and did not admit, even to herself — she had not argued very strongly. And she had watched them go with mingled regret and satisfaction; two emotions that persisted in battling within her until they brought the disquiet that had flushed her cheeks.

It was an hour before Randerson rode up to the edge of the porch, and when Patches came to a halt, and her range boss sat loosely in the saddle, looking down at her, she was composed, even though her cheeks were still a little red.

"You sent for me, ma'am."

It was the employee speaking to his "boss." He was not using the incident of a few nights before to establish familiarity between them; his voice was low, deferential. But Willard Masten's voice had never made her feel quite as she felt at this moment.

"Yes, I sent for you," she said, smiling calmly — trying to seem the employer but getting something into her voice which would not properly belong there under those circumstances. She told herself it was not pleasure — but she saw his eyes flash. "I have found some cartridges, and I want you to teach me how to shoot."

He looked at her with eyes that narrowed with amusement, after a quick glint of surprise.

"I reckon I c'n teach you. Are you figurin' that there's some one in this country that you don't want here any more?"

"No," she said; "I don't expect to shoot anybody. But I have decided that as long as I have made up my mind to stay here and run the Flying W, I may as well learn to be able to protect myself — if occasion arises."

"That's a heap sensible. You c'n never tell when you'll have to do some shootin' out here.

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Not at men, especial," he grinned, "but you'll run across things — a wolf, mebbe, that'll get fresh with you, or a sneakin' coyote that'll kind of make the hair raise on the back of your neck, not because you're scared of him, but because you know his mean tricks an' don't admire them, or a wildcat, or a hydrophobia polecat, ma'am," he said, with slightly reddening cheeks; "but mostly, ma'am, I reckon you'll like shootin' at side-winders best. Sometimes they get mighty full of fight, ma'am — when it's pretty hot."

"How long will it take you to teach me to shoot?" she asked.

"That depends, ma'am. I reckon I could show you how to pull the trigger in a jiffy. That would be a certain kind of shootin'. But as for showin' you how to hit somethin' you shoot at, why, that's a little different. I've knowed men that practiced shootin' for years, ma'am, an' they couldn't hit a barn if they was inside of it. There's others that can hit most anything, right handy. They say it's all in the eye an' the nerves, ma'am — whatever nerves are."

"You haven't any nerves, I suppose, or you wouldn't speak of them that way."

"If you mean that I go to hollerin' an' jumpin'

around when somethin' happens, why I ain't got any. But I've seen folks with nerves, ma'am."

He was looking directly at her when he spoke, his gaze apparently without subtlety. But she detected a gleam that seemed far back in his eyes, and she knew that he referred to her actions of the other night.

She blushed. "I didn't think you would remind me of *that*," she said.

"Why, I didn't, ma'am. I didn't mention any names. But of course, a woman's got nerves; they can't help it."

"Of course men are superior," she taunted.

She resisted an inclination to laugh, for she was rather astonished to discover that man's disposition to boast was present in this son of the wilderness. Also, she was a little disappointed in him.

But she saw him redden.

"I ain't braggin', ma'am. Take them on an average, an' I reckon woman has got as much grit as men. But they show it different. They're quicker to imagine things than men. That makes them see things where there ain't anything to see. A man's mother is always a woman, ma'am, an' if he's got any grit in him he owes a lot of it

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to her. I reckon I owe more to my mother than to my father."

His gaze was momentarily somber, and she felt a quick, new interest in him. Or had she felt this interest all along — a desire to learn something more of him than he had expressed?

"You might get off your horse and sit in the shade for a minute. It is hot, you've had a long ride, and I am not quite ready to begin shooting," she invited.

He got off Patches, led him to the shade of the house, hitched him, and then returned to the porch, taking a chair near her.

"Aunt Martha says you were born here," Ruth said. "Have you always been a cowboy?"

A flash that came into his eyes was concealed by a turn of the head. So she had asked Aunt Martha about him.

"I don't remember ever bein' anything else. As far back as I c'n recollect, there's been cows hangin' around."

"Have you traveled any?"

"To Denver, Frisco, Kansas City. I was in Utah, once, lookin' over the Mormons. They're a curious lot, ma'am. I never could see what on earth a man wanted half a dozen wives for. One

can manage a man right clever. But half a dozen! Why, they'd be pullin' one another's hair out, fightin' over him! One would be wantin' him to do one thing, an' another would be wantin' him to do another. An' between them, the man would be goin' off to drown himself."

"But a woman doesn't always manage her husband," she defended.

"Don't she, ma'am?" he said gently, no guile in his eyes. "Why, all the husbands I've seen seemed to be pretty well managed. You can see samples of it every day, ma'am, if you look around. Young fellows that have acted pretty wild when they was single, always sort of steady down when they're hooked into double harness. They go to actin' quiet an' subdued-like — like they'd lost all interest in life. I reckon it must be their wives managin' them, ma'am."

"It's a pity, isn't it?" she said, her chin lifting.

"The men seem to like it, ma'am. Every day there's new ones makin' contracts for managers."

"I suppose *you* will never sacrifice yourself?" she asked challengingly.

"It ain't time, yet, ma'am," he returned, looking straight at her, his eyes narrowed, with little

wrinkles in the corners. "I'm waitin' for you to tell Masten that you don't want to manage him."

"We won't talk about that, please," she said coldly.

"Then we won't, ma'am."

She sat looking at him, trying to be coldly critical, but not succeeding very well. She was trying to show him that there was small hope of him ever realizing his desire to have her "manage" him, but she felt that she did not succeed in that very well either. Perplexity came into her eyes as she watched him.

"Why is it that you don't like Willard Masten?" she asked at length. "Why is it that he doesn't like you?"

His face sobered. "I don't recollect to have said anything about Masten, ma'am," he said.

"But you don't like him, do you?"

A direct answer was required. "No," he said simply.

"Why?" she persisted.

"I reckon mebbe you'd better ask Masten," he returned, his voice expressionless. Then he looked at her with an amused grin. "If it's goin' to take you any time to learn to shoot, I reckon we'd better begin."

She got up, went into the house for the pistol and cartridges, and came out again, the weapon dangling from her hand.

"Shucks!" he said, when he saw the pistol, comparing its huge bulk to the size of the hand holding it, "you'll never be able to hold it, when it goes off. You ought to have a smaller one."

"Uncle Jep says this ought to stop anything it hits," she declared. "That is just what I want it to do. If I shoot anything once, I don't want to have to shoot again."

"I reckon you're right bloodthirsty, ma'am. But I expect it's so big for you that you won't be able to hit anything."

"I'll show you," she said, confidently. "Where shall we go to shoot? We shall have to have a target, I suppose?"

"Not a movin' one," he said gleefully. "An' I ain't aimin' to hold it for you!"

"Wait until you are asked," she retorted, defiantly. "Perhaps I may be a better shot than you think!"

"I hope so, ma'am."

She looked resentfully at him, but followed him as he went out near the pasture fence, taking with him a soap box that he found near a shed,

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and standing it up behind a post, first making sure there were no cattle within range in the direction that the bullets would take. Then he stepped off twenty paces, and when she joined him he took the pistol from her hands and loaded it from the box. He watched her narrowly as she took it, and she saw the concern in his eyes.

"Oh, I have used a revolver before," she told him, "not so large a one as this, of course. But I know better than to point it at myself."

"I see you do, ma'am." His hand went out quickly and closed over hers, for she had been directing the muzzle of the weapon fairly at his chest. "You ought never point it at anybody that you don't want to shoot," he remonstrated gently.

He showed her how to hold the weapon, told her to stand sideways to the target, with her right arm extended and rigid, level with the shoulder.

He took some time at this; three times after she extended her arm he seemed to find it necessary to take hold of the arm to rearrange its position, lingering long at this work, and squeezing the pistol hand a little too tightly, she thought.

"Don't go to pullin' the trigger too fast or too hard," he warned; "a little time for the first

shot will save you shootin' again, mebbe — until you get used to it. She'll kick some, but you'll get onto that pretty quick."

She pulled the trigger, and the muzzle of the pistol flew upward.

"I reckon that target feels pretty safe, ma'am," he said dryly. "But that buzzard up there will be pullin' his freight — if he's got any sense."

She fired again, her lips compressed determinedly. At the report a splinter of wood flew from the top of the post. She looked at him with an exultant smile.

"That's better," he told her, grinning; "you'll be hittin' the soap box, next."

She did hit it at the fourth attempt, and her joy was great.

For an hour she practiced, using many cartridges, reveling in this new pastime. She hit the target often, and toward the end she gained such confidence and proficiency that her eyes glowed proudly. Then, growing tired, she invited him to the porch again, and until near noon they talked of guns and shooting.

Her interest in him had grown. His interest in her had always been deep, and the constraint that had been between them no longer existed.

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At noon she went into the house and prepared luncheon, leaving him sitting on the porch alone. When she called Randerson in, and he took a chair across from her, she felt a distinct embarrassment. It was not because she was there alone with him, for he had a right to be there; he was her range boss and his quarters were in the house; he was an employee, and no conventions were being violated. But the embarrassment was there.

Did Randerson suspect her interest in him? That question assailed her. She studied him, and was uncertain. For his manner had not changed. He was still quiet, thoughtful, polite, still deferential and natural, with a quaintness of speech and a simplicity that had gripped her, that held her captive.

But her embarrassment fled as the meal progressed. She forgot it in her interest for him. She questioned him again; he answered frankly. And through her questions she learned much of his past life, of his hopes and ambitions. They were as simple and natural as himself.

"I've been savin' my money, ma'am," he told her. "I'm goin' to own a ranch of my own, some day. There's fellows that blow in all their wages in town, not thinkin' of tomorrow. But I quit

that, quite a while ago. I'm lookin' out for tomorrow. It's curious, ma'am. Fellows will try to get you to squander your money, along with their own, an' if you don't, they'll poke fun at you. But they'll respect you for not squanderin' it, like they do. I reckon they know there ain't any sense to it." Thus she discovered that there was little frivolity in his make-up, and pleasure stirred her. And then he showed her another side of his character — his respect for public opinion.

"But I ain't stingy, ma'am. I reckon I've proved it. There's a difference between bein' careful an' stingy."

"How did you prove it?"

He grinned at her. "Why, I ain't mentionin'," he said gently.

But she had heard of his generosity — from several of the men, and from Hagar Catherson. She mentally applauded his reticence.

She learned that he had read — more than she would have thought, from his speech — and that he had profited thereby.

"Books give the writer's opinion of things," he said. "If you read a thoughtful book, you either agree with the writer, or you don't, accordin' to your nature an' understandin'. None

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of them get things exactly right, I reckon, for no man can know everything. He's got to fall down, somewhere. An' so, when you read a book, you've got to do a heap of thinkin' on your own hook, or else you'll get mistaken ideas an' go to gettin' things mixed up. I like to do my own thinkin'."

"Are you always right?"

"Bless you, ma'am, no. I'm scarcely ever right. I'll get to believin' a thing, an' then along will come somethin' else, an' I'll have to start all over again. Or, I'll talk to somebody, an' find that they've got a better way of lookin' at a thing. I reckon that's natural."

They did not go out to shoot again. Instead, they went out on the porch, and there, sitting in the shade, they talked until the sun began to swim low in the sky.

At last he got up, grinning.

"I've done a heap of loafin' today, ma'am. But I've certainly enjoyed myself, talkin' to you. But if you ain't goin' to try to hit the target any more, I reckon I'll be ridin' back to the outfit."

She got up, too, and held out her hand to him. "Thank you," she said. "You have made the day very short for me. It would have been lonesome here, without aunt and uncle."

"I saw them goin'," he informed her.

"And," she continued, smiling, "I am going to ask you to come again, very soon, to teach me more about shooting."

"Any time, ma'am." He still held her hand. And now he looked at it with a blush, and dropped it gently. Her face reddened a little too, for now she realized that he had held her hand for quite a while, and she had made no motion to withdraw it. Their eyes met eloquently. The gaze held for an instant, and then both laughed, as though each had seen something in the eyes of the other that had been concealed until this moment. Then Ruth's drooped. Randerson smiled and stepped off the porch to get his pony.

A little later, after waving his hand to Ruth from a distance, he rode away, his mind active, joy in his heart.

"You're a knowin' horse, Patches," he said confidentially to the pony. "If you are, what do you reckon made her ask so many questions?" He gulped over a thought that came to him.

"She was shootin' at the target, Patches," he mused. "But do you reckon she was aimin' at me?"

CHAPTER XVIII

THE GUNFIGHTER

RED OWEN, foreman of the Flying W in place of Tom Chavis, resigned, was stretched out on his blanket, his head propped up with an arm, looking at the lazy, licking flames of the campfire. He was whispering to Bud Taylor, named by Randerson to do duty as straw boss in place of the departed Pickett, and he was referring to a new man of the outfit who had been hired by Randerson about two weeks before because the work seemed to require the services of another man, and he had been the only applicant.

The new man was reclining on the other side of the fire, smoking, paying no attention to any of the others around him. He was listening, though, to the talk, with a sort of detached interest, a half smile on his face, as though his interest were that of scornful amusement.

He was of medium height, slender, dark. He was taciturn to the point of monosyllabic con-

versation, and the perpetual, smiling sneer on his face had gotten on Red Owen's nerves.

"Since he's joined the outfit, he's opened his yap about three times a day — usual at grub time, when if a man loosens up at all, he'll loosen up then," Red told Taylor, glaring his disapproval. "I've got an idea that I've seen the cuss somewheres before, but I ain't able to place him."

"His mug looks like he was soured on the world — especial himself. If I had a twistin' upper lip like that, I'd sure plant some whiskers on it. A mustache, now, would hide a lot of the hyena in him."

Owen stared meditatively at the new man through the flames. "Yes," he said expressionlessly, "a mustache would make him look a whole lot different." He was straining his mental faculties in an effort to remember a man of his acquaintance who possessed a lower lip like that of the man opposite him, eyes with the same expression in them, and a nose that was similar. He did not succeed, for memory was laggard, or his imagination was playing him a trick. He had worried over the man's face since the first time he had seen it.

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He heaved a deep breath now, and looked perplexedly into the flames. "It's like a word that gits onto the end of your tongue when your brain-box ain't got sense enough to shuck it out," he remarked, lowly. "But I'll git it, some time — if I don't go loco frettin' about it."

"What you figger on gettin' — a new job?" asked Taylor, who had been sinking into a nap.

"Snakes!" sneered Owen.

"Thank yu', I don't want 'em," grinned Taylor with ineffable gentleness, as he again closed his eyes.

Owen surveyed him with cold scorn. Owen's temper, because of his inability to make his memory do his bidding, was sadly out of order. He had been longing for days to make the new man talk, that he might be enabled to sharpen his memory on the man's words.

He studied the man again. He had been studying him all day, while he and some more of the men had worked the cattle out of some timber near the foothills, to the edge of the basin — where they were now camped. But the face was still elusive. If he could only get the man to talking, to watch the working of that lower lip!

His glance roved around the fire. Seven men,

besides the cook — asleep under the wagon — and Randerson, were lying around the fire in positions similar to his own. Randerson, the one exception, was seated on the edge of the chuck box, its canvas cover pushed aside, one leg dangling, his elbow resting on the other.

Randerson had been rather silent for the past few days — since he had ridden in to the ranch-house, and he had been silent tonight, gazing thoughtfully at the fire. Owen's gaze finally centered on the range boss. It rested there for a time, and then roved to the face of the new man — Dorgan, he called himself. Owen started, and his chin went forward, his lips straightening. For he saw Dorgan watching Randerson with a bitter sneer on his lips, his eyes glittering coldly and balefully!

Evil intent was written largely here — evil intent without apparent reason for it. For the man was a stranger here; Randerson had done nothing — to Owen's knowledge — to earn Dorgan's enmity; Randerson did not deliberately make enemies. Owen wondered if Dorgan were one of those misguided persons who take offense at a look unknowingly given, or a word, spoken during momentary abstraction.

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Owen had disliked Dorgan before; he hated him now. For Owen had formed a deep attachment for Randerson. There was a determination in his mind to acquaint the range boss with his suspicions concerning Dorgan's expression, and he got up, after a while, and took a turn around the campfire in the hope of attracting Randerson's attention.

Randerson paid no attention to him. But through the corners of his eyes, as he passed Dorgan, Owen noted that the man flashed a quick, speculative glance at him. But Owen's determination had not lessened. "If he's suspicious of me, he's figgerin' on doin' some dog's trick to Wrecks. I'm puttin' Wrecks wise a few, an' if Dorgan don't like it, he c'n go to blazes!"

He walked to the rear of the chuck box and stood within half a dozen feet of Randerson.

"Figger we've got 'em all out of the timber?" he asked.

There was no answer from Randerson. He seemed absorbed in contemplation of the fire.

"W-r-e-c-k-s!" bawled Owen, in a voice that brought every man of the circle upright, to look wildly around. Taylor was on his feet, his hair bristling, the pallor of mingled fear, astonishment,

and disgust on his face. Owen grinned sardonically at him. "Lay down an' turn over, you wall-eyed gorilla!" admonished Owen. He turned his grin on the others. "Can't a man gas to the boss without all you yaps buttin' in?" he demanded.

"What for are you-all a-yowlin' that-a-way for?" questioned a gentle-voiced Southerner reproachfully. "I was just a-dreamin' of rokin' in a big pot in a cyard game. An' now you've done busted it up." He sank disgustedly to his blanket.

"He thinks he's a damned coyote," said a voice.

"You're thinkin' it's a yowl," said another. "But you've got him wrong. He's a jackass, come a-courtin'."

"A man can't get no sleep at all, scarcely," grumbled another.

But Owen had accomplished his purpose. For during the exchange of amenities Randerson had answered him — without turning, though:

"What you wantin', Red?" he said.

"You figger we've got 'em all out of the timber?" repeated Owen.

"Shucks." Randerson's voice was rich with

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mirth. "Why, I reckon. Unless you was figgerin' to use a fine-toothed comb. Why, the boys was all a-nappin', Red," he added gently.

He did not look around, so that Owen might give him the warning wink that would have put him on his guard. Owen would have tapped him on the shoulder, but glancing sidelong, he saw Dorgan watching him, and he did not. A ripple of scornful laughter greeted Randerson's reply, and with a sneering glance around, Owen again sought his blanket.

The reception that had been accorded his effort had made him appear ridiculous, he knew. It would be days before the outfit would cease referring to it.

He stretched himself out on the blanket, but after a few moments of reflection, he sat up, doggedly. He had been imagining all sorts of dire things that Dorgan might have in mind. He had a presentiment of impending trouble, and so deep was it that his forehead was damp with perspiration.

Several of the men, disturbed by Owen, had sat up, and were smoking and talking, and when he heard one of the men, named Blair, refer to a gunman, Watt Kelso, who had formerly graced

Lazette with his presence, a light leaped into Owen's eyes, his teeth came together with a snap, his lips formed into straight lines, and he drew a slow, deep breath. For that was the word that had eluded him — Kelso! And Kelso — how plain and simple it seemed to him now — Kelso was Dorgan, sitting opposite him now! Kelso minus his mustache, looking much different than when he had seen him last, but Kelso, just the same — undeniably Kelso!

So great was Owen's excitement over this discovery that he was forced to lie down and turn his back to the fire for fear that Kelso might look at him and thus discover that he was recognized.

As he lay there, his brain yielded to a riot of speculation. What was Kelso doing here? Why had he come, minus the mustache, assuming the name, Dorgan? What meant his glances at Randerson?

He provided an explanation presently. Memory drew a vivid picture for him. It showed him a saloon in Lazette, some card tables, with men seated around them. Among the men were Kelso and Randerson. Randerson had been a mere youth. Kelso and Randerson were seated opposite each other, at the same table. Kelso

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had been losing — was in bad temper. He had charged Randerson with cheating. There had been words, and then Kelso had essayed to draw his pistol. There was a scuffle, a shot, and Kelso had been led away with a broken arm, broken by Randerson's bullet — blaspheming, and shouting threats at Randerson. And now, after years of waiting, Kelso had come to carry out his threats. It was all plain to Owen, now. And with the knowledge, Owen's excitement abated and he sat up, coldly observant, alert, to watch and listen.

For, while Owen had been thinking, Blair had continued to talk of Watt Kelso, of his deeds and his personality. And Owen saw that for the first time since joining the outfit, Kelso seemed interested in the talk around him. He was watching Blair with narrowed, glittering eyes, in which Owen could see suspicion. It was as though he were wondering if Blair knew that the man of whom he spoke now was at that minute sitting close to him, listening. But presently, Owen became convinced that Kelso thought not, for the suspicion in the gunman's eyes changed to cold, secret amusement.

"Kelso's pulled his freight from Lazette," declared Blair, during the course of his talk. "It's

likely he'll drift somewhere where he ain't so well known. It got to be pretty hard pickin' for him around here — folks fight shy of him. But he was sure a killer! ”

Blair paused. “ I reckon I might mention a man that he didn't kill,” said a man who lay near Blair. “ An' he wanted to, mighty bad.”

“ We're wantin' to know,” returned Blair. “ He must have been a high-grade gun-slinger.”

The man nodded toward Randerson, who apparently was not listening to this conversation. There was a subdued chuckle from the man, and grunts of admiration or skepticism from the others. Owen's gaze was fixed on Kelso; he saw the latter's eyes gleam wickedly. Yes, that was it, Owen saw now; the recollection of his defeat at Randerson's hands still rankled in the gunman's mind. Owen saw him glance covertly at Randerson, observed his lips curl.

One of the other men saw the glance also. Not having the knowledge possessed by Owen, the man guffawed loudly, indicating the gunman.

“ Dorgan ain't swallerin' your yarn about Randerson puttin' a kink in Kelso,” he said to Blair.

Randerson turned, a mild grin on his face.

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"You fellows quit your soft-soapin' about that run-in with Kelso," he said. "There ain't any compliments due me. I was pretty lucky to get out of that scrape with a whole hide. They told me Kelso's gun got snagged when he was tryin' to draw it."

So then, Randerson *had* been listening, despite his apparent abstraction. And Owen sat rigid when he saw the gunman look coldly at Randerson and clear his throat.

Plainly, if Kelso had been awaiting an opportunity to take issue with Randerson, it was now!

"Yes," he said, "you was mighty lucky."

There was a sneer in the words, and malevolence in the twist of his lips as his voice came through them.

A flat, dead silence followed the speech. Every man held the position in which he had been when the gunman had spoken; nothing but their eyes moved, and these were directed from Randerson to the gunman and back again, questioningly, expectantly. For in the hearts of the men who had been talking until now there had been no thought of discord; they had spoken without rancor. But hostility, cold, premeditated, had been in the new man's speech.

Randerson moved his head slightly, and he was looking straight into Kelso's eyes. Kelso had moved a little; he was now sitting on his saddle, having shifted his position when Blair had begun to talk, and the thumb of his right hand was hooked in his cartridge belt just above the holster of his pistol.

Randerson's face was expressionless. Only his eyes, squinted a little, with a queer, hard glint in them, revealed any emotion that might have affected him over Kelso's words.

"Yes, Dorgan," he said gently, "I was mighty lucky."

Kelso's lips curved into a slow, contemptuous smile.

"I reckon you've always been lucky," he said.

"Meanin'?"

"Meanin' that you've fell into a soft place here, that you ain't fit to fill!"

Again a silence fell, dread, premonitory. It was plain to every man of the outfit, awake and listening, that Dorgan had a grievance — whether real or imaginary, it made little difference — and that he was determined to force trouble. Only Owen, apparently, knowing the real state of affairs, knew that the reference to Randerson's

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inefficiency was a mere pretext. But that violence, open, deadly, was imminent, foreshadowed by Dorgan's word, every man knew, and all sat tense and pale, awaiting Randerson's reply.

They knew, these men, that it was not Randerson's way to force trouble — that he would avoid it if he could do so without dishonor. But could he avoid it now? The eyes that watched him saw that he meant to try, for a slow, tolerant smile appeared on his lips.

"I reckon you're plumb excited — Owen wakin' you up out of your sleep like he did," said Randerson. "But," he added, the smile chilling a little, "I ain't askin' no man to work for me, if he ain't satisfied. You can draw your time tomorrow, if it don't suit you here."

"I'm drawin' it now!" sneered the gunman. "I ain't workin' for no pussy-kitten specimen which spends his time gallivantin' around the country with a girl, makin' believe he's bossin', when —" Here he added something that made the outfit gasp and stiffen.

As he neared the conclusion of the speech, his right hand fell to his gun-holster. Owen had been watching him, and at the beginning of the movement he shouted a warning:

"Look out, Wrecks!"

He had been afraid to tell Randerson that it was Kelso who was facing him, for fear that the information, bursting upon Randerson quickly, would disconcert him.

But Randerson had been watching, understanding the drift of the gunman's words. And when he saw the shoulder of his gun-arm move, his own right hand dropped, surely, swiftly. Kelso's gun had snagged in its holster years before. It came freely enough now. But its glitter at his side was met by the roar and flame spurt of Randerson's heavy six, the thumb snap on the hammer telling of the lack of a trigger spring, the position of the weapon indicating that it had not been drawn from its holster.

Apparently not a man in the outfit had noticed this odd performance, though they had been held with dumb astonishment over the rapidity with which it had been executed. But they saw the red, venomous streak split the night; they heard the gunman's gurgling gasp of amazement, and they watched, with ashen faces, while he dropped his weapon, sagged oddly forward and tumbled headlong into the sand near the fire. Then several of them sprang forward to drag him back.

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It had seemed that none of the men had noticed that Randerson had seemed to shoot his pistol while it was still in the holster. One, however, had noticed. It was Red Owen. And while the other men were pulling the gunman back from the fire, Owen stepped close to Randerson, lifted the holster, and examined it quickly. He dropped it, with a low exclamation of astonishment.

"I was wonderin' — Holy smoke! It's a phony holster, fixed on the gun to look like the real thing! An' swung from the belt by the trigger guard! Lord, man! Did you know?"

"That Dorgan was Kelso?" said Randerson, with a cold smile. "I reckon. I knowed him the day he asked for a job. An' I knowed what he come for — figurin' on settlin' that grudge."

Randerson and Owen started toward the gunman, to determine how badly he had been hit; they were met by Blair. There was amazement and incredulity in the man's eyes.

"He's goin' to cash in — quick," he said. "You got him, pretty nearly proper — just over the heart. But, but, he says he's Watt Kelso! An' that that eastern dude, Masten, sent him over here — payin' him five hundred cold, to perforate you!"

Randerson ran to where Kelso lay, gasping and panting for breath. He knelt beside him.

"You talkin' straight, Kelso?" he asked. "Did Masten hire you to put me out of business?"

"Sure," whispered Kelso.

"Where's Masten stayin'?"

"With Chavis — in the shack. He's been there right along, except," he finished, with a grim attempt at humor, "when he's been rushin' that biscuit-shooter in Lazette."

Five minutes later, standing near one of the wheels of the chuck-wagon, gazing somberly at the men, who were carrying Kelso away, Randerson spoke grimly to Owen, who was standing beside him.

"Pickett an' then Kelso! Both of them was sure bad enough. But I reckon Masten's got them both roped an' hog-tied for natural meanness." He turned to Owen. "I reckon I had to do it, old man," he said, a quaver in his voice.

"Buck up, Wrecks!" Owen slapped him on the shoulder, and turned toward the men.

Randerson watched him, but his thoughts were elsewhere. "I reckon she'd have wanted it different," he said to himself.

CHAPTER XIX

READY GUN AND CLEAN HEART

UNCLE JEPSON understood the cow-punchers because he understood human nature, and because he had a strain of the wild in him that had been retained since his youth. Their simplicity, their directness, had been his own; their frankness and generosity, their warm, manly impulses — all reminded him of the days before age, with its accompanying conservatism of thought and action, had placed a governor upon them. They understood him, too, recognizing him as their kind. Blair, especially, had taken a fancy to him, and therefore it was not many days after the shooting of Kelso that Uncle Jepson got the story, with all its gruesome details, from his lips.

The tale was related in strictest confidence, and Uncle Jepson did not repeat it.

But the main fact, that Randerson had killed another man in his outfit, found its way to Ruth's ears through the medium of a roaming puncher

who had stopped for an hour at the ranchhouse. Ruth had confirmed the news through questioning several Flying W men, and, because of their reluctance to answer her inquiries, their expressionless faces, she gathered that the shooting had not met with their approval. She did not consider that they had given her no details, that they spoke no word of blame or praise. She got nothing but the bare fact — that Randerson's gun had again wrought havoc.

She had not seen Masten. A month had slipped by since the day of his departure, when she got a note from him, by messenger, from Lazette, saying that his business was not yet concluded, and that possibly, two weeks more would elapse before he would be able to visit the Flying W.

Had Randerson, standing near the chuck wagon on the night of the shooting of Kelso, known what effect the news would have on Ruth? "I reckon she would have wanted it different," he had reflected, then. And he had been entirely correct, for the news had destroyed something that had been growing and flourishing in her heart. It had filled her soul with disappointment, at least; repugnance and loathing were not very far away. She had almost been persuaded, that

day when he had taught her how to use the pistol. The killing of Pickett had grown dim and distant in her mental vision; Randerson had become a compelling figure that dominated her thoughts. But this second killing! She could no longer interpret the steady, serene gleam in his eyes as mild confidence and frank directness; as she saw them now they reflected hypocrisy — the cold, designing cunning of the habitual taker of human life.

She had been very near to making a mistake; she had almost yielded to the lure of the romance that had seemed to surround him; the magnetic personality of him had attracted her. He attracted her no longer — her heart was shut to him. And, during the days of Masten's continuing absence — in the times when she reflected on her feelings toward Randerson on the day he had taught her the use of the pistol, she bitterly reproached herself for her momentary lack of loyalty to the Easterner. She had been weak for an instant — as life is measured — and she would make it up to Masten — by ceasing to be irritated by his moods, through paying no attention to his faults, which, she now saw, were infinitely less grave than those of the man who had impressed

her for an instant — and by yielding to his suggestion that she marry him before the fall round-up.

In these days, too, she seriously thought of discharging Randerson, for he had not ridden in to report the killing and to offer a defense for it, but she remembered Vickers' words: "Randerson is square," and she supposed that all cowboys were alike, and would shoot — to kill — if they considered their provocation to be great enough.

But these thoughts did not occupy all of her time. She found opportunities to ride and sew and talk — the latter mostly with Aunt Martha and Uncle Jepson. And she kept making her visits to Hagar Catherson.

Of late Ruth had noticed a change in the girl's manner. She seemed to have lost the vivacity that had swept upon her with the coming of her new clothes; she had grown quiet and thoughtful, and had moods of intense abstraction. Ruth rode to the cabin one morning, to find her sitting on the edge of the porch, hugging Nig tightly and whispering to him. Her eyes were moist when Ruth rode up to the porch and looked down at her, but they filled with delight when they rested upon her visitor.

She did not get up, though, and still held Nig, despite the dog's attempts to release himself.

"Have you been crying, Hagar?" Ruth inquired as she dismounted and sat on the edge of the porch close to the girl.

Hagar smiled wanly and rubbed her eyes vigorously with the back of her free hand, meanwhile looking sidelong at Ruth.

"Why, I reckon not," she answered hesitatingly, "that is, not cryin' regular. But I was just tellin' Nig, here, that he's the only sure enough friend I've got — that can be depended on not to fool anybody."

"Why, Hagar!" Ruth was astonished and perhaps a little hurt by this pessimistic view. "What an odd idea for you to have! Who has fooled you, Hagar?"

"Nobody," said the girl almost sullenly. She dug her bare toe into the deep sand at the edge of the porch and looked down at the miniature hill she was making, her lips set queerly. Ruth had already noticed that she was dressed almost as she had been at their first meeting — a slip-over apron that Ruth had given her being the only new garment. It was the lonesomeness, of course, Ruth reflected, and perhaps a vision of

the dreary future, prospectless, hopeless, to be filled with the monotony of the past. Her arm stole out and was placed on Hagar's shoulder.

"I haven't fooled you, Hagar," she said; "have I?"

"No, ma'am." Her lips quivered. She glanced furtively at Ruth, and a half frightened, half dreading look came into her eyes. "Nobody's fooled me," she added with a nervous laugh. "I was just feelin' sorta dumpish, I reckon."

"You mustn't brood, you know," consoled Ruth. "It ruins character."

"What's character?"

"Why — why," hesitated Ruth, "the thing that makes you yourself — apart from every other person; your reputation; the good that is in you — the good you feel."

"I ain't got any," said the girl, morosely, grimly.

"Why, Hagar, you have! Everybody has — either good or bad."

"Mine's bad, I reckon — if I've got any." She suddenly buried her face on Ruth's shoulder and sobbed.

Perplexed, astonished, almost dismayed, Ruth held her off and tried to look at her face. But

the girl only buried it deeper and continued to cry.

“Why, Hagar; whatever is the matter?”

There was no answer, and after holding her for a time, Ruth succeeded in getting a look at her face. It was tear-stained, but dogged in expression, and had Ruth been experienced in reading the human emotions, she could have seen the guilt in the girl's eyes, lurking far back. She also might have seen the determination in them — a determination not to tell her secret. And a sorrow, also, was there — aroused through the thought that she had deceived Ruth, and could not tell her.

Hagar realized now that she had permitted her emotions to carry her too far, that she had aroused Ruth's curiosity. Ruth must never know! She made an effort and sat up, laughing grimly through her tears, shaking her hair back from her eyes, brushing it away fiercely.

“Dad says there's times when I'm half loco,” she said. “I reckon he's right.” She recovered her composure rapidly, and in a few minutes there were no traces of tears or of mental distress. But Ruth was puzzled, and after she left the cabin she tried in vain to provide an explanation for the girl's strange conduct.

On her next visit to the cabin, Ruth was astonished when Hagar asked her bluntly:

"Ain't there no punishment for men who deceive girls?"

"Very little, Hagar, I fear — unless it is God's punishment."

"Shucks!" The girl's eyes flashed vindictively. "There ought to be. Durn 'em, anyway!"

"Hagar, what has brought such a subject into your mind?" said Ruth wonderingly.

The girl reddened, but met Ruth's eyes determinedly. "I've got a book in here, that dad got with some other traps from ol' man Cullen's girls, back in Red Rock — they thought we was poorly, an' they helped us that-a-way. It's 'Millie's Lovers,' an' it tells how a man deceived a girl, an' run away an' left her — the sneakin' coyote!"

"Girls shouldn't read such books, Hagar."

"Yes, they ought to. But it ought to tell in 'em how to get even with the men who do things like that!" She frowned as she looked at Ruth. "What would you think of a man that done that in real life?"

"I should think that he wouldn't be much of a man," said Ruth.

READY GUN AND CLEAN HEART

As before, Ruth departed from this visit, puzzled and wondering.

On another morning, a few days following Ruth's discovery of the shooting of Kelso, she found Hagar standing on the porch. The dog had apprised Hagar of the coming of her visitor. Hagar's first words were:

"Did you hear? Rex Randerson killed Kelso."

"I heard about it some days ago," said Ruth. "It's horrible!"

"What do you reckon is horrible about it?" questioned Hagar, with a queer look at her friend.

"Why," returned Ruth, surprised; "the deed itself! The very thought of one human being taking the life of another!"

"There's worse things than killin' a man that's tryin' to make you shuffle off," declared Hagar evenly. "Rex Randerson wouldn't kill nobody unless they made him do it. An' accordin' to what dad says, Kelso pulled first. Rex ain't lettin' nobody perforate *him*, you bet!"

"He is too ready with his pistol."

The girl caught the repugnance in Ruth's voice. "I thought you kind of liked Randerson," she said.

THE RANGE BOSS

Ruth blushed. "What made you think that?" she demanded.

"I've heard that you've gone ridin' with him a lot. I just reckoned it."

"You are mistaken, Hagar. I do not like Randerson at all. He is my range boss — that is all. A murderer could never be a friend to me."

A shadow came over Hagar's face. "Rex Randerson has got a clean heart," she said slowly. She stood looking at Ruth, disappointment plain in her eyes. The disappointment was quickly succeeded by suspicion; she caught her breath, and the hands that were under her apron gripped each other hard.

"I reckon you'll take up with Masten again," she said, trying to control her voice.

Ruth looked intently at her, but she did not notice the girl's emotion through her interest in her words.

"What do you mean by 'again'?"

"I heard that you'd broke your engagement."

"Who told you that?" Ruth's voice was sharp, for she thought Randerson perhaps had been talking.

Hagar blushed crimson and resorted to a lie. "My dad told me. He said he'd heard it."

READY GUN AND CLEAN HEART

"Well, it isn't true," Ruth told her firmly; "I have never broken with Mr. Masten. And we are to be married soon."

She turned, for she was slightly indignant at this evidence that the people in the country near her had been meddling with her affairs, and she did not see the ashen pallor that quickly spread over Hagar's face. Had Ruth been looking she must have suspected the girl's secret. But it took her some time to mount her pony, and then looking back she waved her hand at Hagar, who was smiling, though with pale and drawn face.

Hagar stood rigid on the porch until she could no longer see Ruth. Then she sank to the edge of the porch, gathered the dog Nig into her arms, and buried her face in his unkempt shoulder. Rocking back and forth in a paroxysm of impotent passion, she spoke to the dog:

"I can't kill him now, Nig, he's goin' to marry *her*! Oh Nig, Nig, what am I goin' to do now?" And then she looked up scornfully, her eyes flashing. "She won't let Rex be a friend of hers, because he's killed two men that God had ought to have killed a long while ago! But she'll marry Masten — who ain't fit to be Rex's dog. She won't, Nig! Why — ?"

She got up and started for the door. But nearing it, she sank upon the threshold, crying and moaning, while Nig, perplexed at this conduct on the part of his mistress, stood off a little and barked loudly at her.

CHAPTER XX

THE BUBBLE — DREAMS

LOPING his pony through the golden haze of the afternoon, Randerson came over the plains toward the Flying W ranchhouse, tingling with anticipation. The still small voice to which he had listened in the days before Ruth's coming had not lied to him; Fate, or whatever power ruled the destinies of lovers, had made her for him. Man's interference might delay the time of possession, his thoughts were of Masten for a brief instant, and his lips straightened, but in the end there could be no other outcome.

But though he was as certain of her as he was that the sun would continue to rule the days, he kept his confidence from betraying his thoughts, and when at last he rode slowly down along the corral fence, past the bunkhouse and the other buildings, to the edge of the porch, sitting quietly in the saddle and looking down at Ruth, who was sitting in a rocker, sewing, his face was grave and his manner that of unconscious reverence.

Ruth had been on the porch for more than an hour. And as on the day when he had come riding in in obedience to her orders to teach her the mysteries of the six-shooter, she watched him today — with anticipation, but with anticipation of a different sort, in which was mingled a little regret, but burdened largely with an eagerness to show him, unmistakably, that he was not the sort of man that she could look upon seriously. And so when she saw him ride up to the porch and bring his pony to a halt, she laid her sewing in her lap, folded her hands over it, and watched him with outward calmness, though with a vague sorrow gripping her. For in spite of what he had done, she still felt the man's strong personality, his virility — the compelling lure of him. She experienced a quick, involuntary tightening of the muscles when she heard his voice — for it intensified the regret in her — low, drawling, gentle:

“ I have come in to report to you, ma'am.”

“ Very well,” she said calmly. She leaned back in her chair, looking at him, feeling a quick pulse of pity for him, for as she sat there and waited, saying nothing further, she saw a faint red steal into his cheeks. She knew that he had expected

an invitation to join her on the porch; he was entitled to that courtesy because of her treatment of him on the occasion of his previous visit; and that when the invitation did not come he could not but feel deeply the embarrassment of the situation.

The faint glow died out of his face, and the lines of his lips grew a trifle more firm. This reception was not the one he had anticipated, but then there were moods into which people fell. She was subject to moods, too, for he remembered the night she had hurt her ankle — how she had “roasted” him. And his face grew long with an inward mirth. She would ask him to get off his horse, presently, and then he was going to tell her of his feelings on that night.

But she did not invite him to alight. On the contrary, she maintained a silence that was nearly severe. He divined that this mood was to continue and instead of getting off his pony he swung crossways in the saddle.

“We’ve got the cattle all out of the hills an’ the timber, an’ we’re workin’ down the crick toward here,” he told her. “There ain’t nothin’ unusual happened, except” — and here he paused for a brief instant — “that I had to shoot a man.

It was Watt Kelso, from over Lazette way. I hired him two weeks before."

"I heard of it," she returned steadily, her voice expressionless.

"I hated like poison to do it. But I had no choice. He brought it on himself."

"Yes, I suppose so," she said flatly. She looked at him now with the first flash of emotion that she had allowed him to see. "If killing people is your trade, and you choose to persist in it, I don't see how we are to stop you."

He looked sharply at her, but his voice was low and even. "I don't shoot folks for the fun of it, ma'am."

"No?" — with scornful disbelief. "Well, I presume it doesn't make much difference. Dead people wouldn't appreciate the joke, anyway."

His face was serious now, for he could see that she was deeply disturbed over the shooting.

"I reckon you wouldn't believe me, no matter how hard I talked," he said. "You'd have your own opinion. It sure does look bad for me — havin' to plug two guys in one season. An' I don't blame you for feelin' like you do about it. But I've got this to say," he went on earnestly. "Kelso come to the outfit, lookin' for trouble.

I'd had a run-in with him a few years ago. An' I shot him — in the arm. I thought it was all over. But along comes Kelso, with his mustache shaved off so's I wouldn't know him — which I did. He asked me for a job, an' I give it to him — hopin'. But hopes — ”

“ If you knew him, why did you give him a job? ” she interrupted. “ It might have saved you shooting him.”

“ If he was wantin' to force trouble he'd have done it sooner or later, ma'am.”

“ Well? ” she said, interested in spite of herself.

“ He waited two weeks for a chance. I didn't give him any chance. An' then, one night, after Red Owen had been cuttin' up some monkey shines, he talked fresh an' pulled his gun. He was a regular gunfighter, ma'am; he'd been hired to put me out of business.”

There was an appeal in his eyes that did not show in his voice; and it would be all the appeal that he would make. Looking fixedly at him, she became certain of that.

“ Do you know who hired him? ”

There was that in her tone which told him that he might now make his case strong — might even

convince her, and thus be restored to that grace from which he, plainly, had fallen. But he was a claimant for her hand; he had told her that he would not press that claim until she broke her engagement with Masten, and if he now told her that it had been the Easterner who had hired Kelso to kill him, he would have felt that she would think he had taken advantage of the situation, selfishly. And he preferred to take his chance, slender though it seemed to be.

"He didn't tell me."

"Then you only suspected it?"

He was silent for an instant. Then: "A man told me he was hired."

"Who told you?"

"I ain't mentionin', ma'am." He could not tell her that Blair had told him, after he had told Blair not to mention it.

She smiled with cold incredulity, and he knew his chance had gone.

But he was not prepared for her next words. In her horror for his deed, she had ceased to respect him; she had ceased to believe him; his earnest protestations of innocence of wantonness she thought were hypocritical — an impression strengthened by his statement that Kelso had been

hired to kill him, and by his inability to show evidence to prove it. A shiver of repulsion, for him and his killings, ran over her.

"I believe you are lying, Randerson," she said, coldly.

He started, stiffened, and then stared at her, his face slowly whitening. She had said words that, spoken by a man, would have brought about another of those killings that horrified her. She watched him, sensing for the first time something of the terrible emotions that sometimes beset men in tense situations but entirely unconscious of the fact that she had hurt him far more than any bullet could have hurt him.

Yet, aside from the whiteness of his face, he took the fatal thrust without a sign. His dreams, that had seemed to be so real to him while riding over the plains toward the ranchhouse, had been bubbles that she had burst with a breath. He saw the wrecks of them go sailing into the dust at his feet.

He had gazed downward, and he did not look up at once. When he did, his gaze rested, as though by prearrangement, on her. Her eyes were still cold, still disbelieving, and he drew himself slowly erect.

"I reckon you've said enough, ma'am," he told her quietly, though his voice was a trifle hoarse. "A man couldn't help but understand that." He wheeled Patches and took off his hat to her. "I'll send Red Owen to see you, ma'am," he added. "I can recommend Red."

She was on her feet, ready to turn to go into the house, for his manner of receiving her insult had made her feel infinitely small and mean. But at his words she halted and looked at him.

"Why should you send Red Owen to see me? What do you mean?" she demanded.

"Why, you've made it pretty plain, ma'am," he answered with a low laugh, turning his head to look back at her. "I reckon you wouldn't expect me to go on workin' for you, after you've got so you don't trust me any more. Red will make you a good range boss."

He urged Patches on. But she called to him, a strange regret filling her, whitening her cheeks, and Patches came again to a halt.

"I — I don't want Red Owen for a range boss," she declared with a gulp. "If you are determined to quit, I — I suppose I cannot prevent it. But you can stay a week or two, can't you — until I can get somebody I like?"

THE BUBBLE — DREAMS

He smiled gravely. "Why, I reckon I can, ma'am," he answered respectfully. "There won't be no awful hurry about it. I wouldn't want to disconvenience you."

And then he was off into the deepening haze of the coming evening, riding tall and rigid, with never a look behind to show her that he cared.

Standing in the doorway of the house, the girl watched him, both hands at her breast, her eyes wide, her lips parted, her cheeks flushed, until the somber shadows of twilight came down and swallowed him. Then, oppressed with a sudden sense of the emptiness of the world, she went into the house.

CHAPTER XXI

ONE TOO MANY

TO no man in the outfit did Randerson whisper a word concerning the result of his visit to the ranchhouse — that he would cease to be the Flying W range boss just as soon as Ruth Harkness could find a man to replace him. He went his way, thoughtful, silent, grave, filled with somber thoughts and dark passions that sometimes flashed in his eyes, but taking no man into his confidence. And yet they knew that all was not well with him. For in other days his dry humor, his love of wholesome fun, had shortened many an hour for them, and his serenity, in ordinary difficulties, had become a byword to them. And so they knew that the thing which was troubling him now was not ordinary.

They thought they knew what was troubling him. Kelso had been hired to take his life. Kelso had lost his own in the effort. That might have seemed to end it. But it had become known that Kelso had been a mere tool in the hands of an

ONE TOO MANY

unscrupulous plotter, and until the plotter had been sent on the way that Kelso had gone there could be no end. Already there were whispers over the country because of Randerson's delay.

Of course, they would wait a reasonable time; they would give him his "chance." But they did not know what was holding him back — that deep in his heart lurked a hope that one day he might still make his dreams come true, and that if he killed Masten, Ruth's abhorrence of him and his deeds, already strong, could never be driven from her. If he lost this hope, Masten was doomed.

And during the second week following his latest talk with Ruth, the girl unconsciously killed it. He met her in the open, miles from the ranchhouse, and he rode toward her, deeply repentant, resolved to brave public scorn by allowing Masten to live.

He smiled gravely at her when he came close — she waiting for him, looking at him, unmoved. For she had determined to show him that she had meant what she had said to him.

"Have you found a new range boss, ma'am?" he said gently. He had hoped that she might answer lightly, and then he would have known that she would forgive him, in time.

But her chin went up and she looked coldly at him. "You will be able to leave the Flying W shortly, Randerson," she said. "I am going to leave such matters for Mr. Masten to look after."

She urged her pony away and left him, staring somberly after her.

Two hours later he was riding down the declivity toward Chavis' shack, in the basin. He had ridden first to the outfit, and had talked with Owen. And his appearance had been such that when he left the foreman the latter sought out Blair.

"If I don't miss my reckonin', Masten's goin' to get his'n today."

Randerson rode, straight as Patches could carry him, to the door of Chavis' shack. No one appeared to greet him, but he had seen horses, saddled, hitched to the corral fence, and he knew that some one was about. Chavis, Kester, and Hilton were inside the shack, and when they heard him ride up, they came to the door, curious. And when they saw him they stiffened and stood rigid, with not a finger moving, for they had seen men, before, meditating violence, and they saw the signs in Randerson's chilled and narrowed eyes, and in the grim set of his lips.

His lips moved; his teeth hardly parted to allow the words to come through them. They writhed through:

"Where's Masten?"

Three pairs of lungs sighed audibly in process of deflation.

It was Chavis who answered; the other two looked at him when the question came, silently. Chavis would have lied, but the light in Randerson's eyes warned him not to trifle, and the truth came from his lips:

"Masten's gone to the Flyin' W ranchhouse."

"I reckon that's all," said Randerson shortly. "I'm thankin' you."

He rode away, grinning coldly back at them, still watchful, for he knew Chavis, guiding his pony toward the declivity on the other side of the basin. The three men watched him until the pony had climbed to the mesa. Then Chavis turned to the others.

"I reckon he's goin' to see Masten about that Kelso deal," he said. "Somebody ought to put Masten wise."

Kester grinned. "It's bound to come," he commented. "Let's finish our game; it is your deal."

On the mesa, Randerson urged Patches along the edge, over the trail that Ruth had taken when, months before, she had come upon Chavis and Kester at the declivity.

"Nothin' would have happened, if it hadn't been for Masten," he told himself as he rode away. "Pickett wouldn't have got fresh, an' Kelso would have kept himself mighty shady. We'd have fought it out, square — me an' Masten. I reckon *I* didn't kill Pickett and Kelso; it was Masten that done it."

He came, after a while, to the rock upon which he had found Ruth lying on the night of the accident. And he sat and looked long at the grass plot where he had laid her when she had fainted.

"She looked like an angel, layin' there," he reminded himself, his eyes eloquent. "She's too blamed good for that sneakin' dude."

He came upon the ruined boot, and memories grimmed his lips. "It's busted — like my dreams," he said, surveying it, ripped and rotting. "I reckon this is as good a place as any," he added, looking around him.

And he dismounted, led Patches out of sight behind some high bushes that grew far back from

the rocks; came back, stretched himself out on the grass plot, pulled his hat over his eyes and yielded to his gloomy thoughts. But after he had lain there a while, he spoke aloud:

“He'll come this way, if he comes at all.”

With the memory of Randerson's threat always before him, “if I ever lay eyes on you ag'in, I'll go gunnin' for you,” Masten rode slowly and watchfully. For he had felt that the words had not been idle ones, and it had been because of them that he had hired Kelso. And he went toward the ranchhouse warily, much relieved when he passed the bunkhouse, to find that Randerson was apparently absent. He intended to make this one trip, present to Ruth his excuses for staying away, and then go back to Chavis' shack, there to remain out of Randerson's sight, until he could devise another plan that, he hoped, would put an end to the cowpuncher who was forever tormenting him.

His excuses had been accepted by Ruth, for she was in the mood to restore him to that spot in her heart that Randerson had come very near to occupy. She listened to him calmly, and agreed, without conscious emotion, to his proposal that they ride, on the Monday following, to

Lazette, to marry. She had reopened the subject a little wearily, for now that Randerson was hopeless she wanted to have the marriage over with as soon as possible. She saw now, that it had been the vision of Randerson, always prominent in her mind, that had caused her to put off the date of her marriage to Masten when he had mentioned it before. That vision had vanished now, and she did not care how soon she became Masten's wife.

On the porch of the ranchhouse they had reached the agreement, and triumphantly Masten rode away into the darkness, foreseeing the defeat of the man whom he had feared as a possible rival, seeing, too — if he could not remove him entirely — his dismissal from the Flying W and his own ascent to power.

"On Monday, then," he said softly to Ruth, as ready to leave, he had looked down at her from his horse. "I shall come early, remember, for I have waited long."

"Yes, Monday," she had answered. And then, dully: "I have waited, too."

Masten was thinking of this exchange of words as he rode past the ford where the Lazette trail crossed into the broken country beyond it.

He had not liked the tone of her voice when she had answered him; she had not seemed enthusiastic enough to suit him. But he did not feel very greatly disturbed over her manner, for Monday would end it, and then he would do as he pleased.

He was passing a huge boulder, when from out of the shadow surrounding it a somber figure stepped, the star-shot sky shedding sufficient light for Masten to distinguish its face. He recognized Randerson, and he voluntarily brought his pony to a halt and stiffened in the saddle, fear, cold and paralyzing, gripping him. He did not speak; he made no sound beyond a quick gasp as his surprised lungs sought air, and he was incapable of action.

Randerson, though, did not make a hostile movement and did not present a foreboding figure. His arms were folded over his chest, and if it had not been for Masten's recollection of those grim words, "I'll go gunnin' for you," Masten would have felt reasonably secure. But he remembered the words, and his voice caught in his throat and would not come, when he essayed to bluster and ask Randerson the cause for this strange and dramatic appearance.

But there was no thought of the dramatic in Randerson's mind as he stood there — nothing but cold hatred and determination — nothing except a bitter wish that the man on the pony would reach for his gun and thus make his task easier for him.

The hoped-for movement did not come, and Randerson spoke shortly:

“Get off your cayuse!”

Masten obeyed silently, his knees shaking under him. Was it to be another fist fight? Randerson's voice broke in on this thought:

“I promised to kill you. You're a thing that sneaks around at night on its belly, an' you ought to be killed. But I'm goin' to give you a chance — like you give me when you set Kelso on me. That'll let you die like a man — which you ain't!” He tapped the gun at his right hip. “I'll use this one. We'll stand close — where we are — to make your chance better. When I count three you draw your gun. Show your man now, if there's any in you!”

He dropped his hands from his chest and held the right, the fingers bent like the talons of a bird of prey, about to seize a victim. He waited, his eyes gleaming in the starlight, with cold alertness

for Masten's expected move toward his gun. But after a long, breathless silence, during which Masten's knees threatened to give way, he leaned forward.

"Flash it! Quick! Or you go out anyway!"

"I'm unarmed!" Masten's voice would not come before. It burst forth now, hysterically, gaspingly, sounding more like a moan than the cry of a man pleading for his life.

But it stung the stern-faced man before him to action, rapid and tense. He sprang forward with a low, savage exclamation, drawing one of his big weapons and jamming its muzzle deep into Masten's stomach. Then, holding it there, that the Easterner might not trick him, he ran his other hand over the frightened man's clothing, and found no weapon. Then he stepped back with a laugh, low, scornful, and bitter. The discovery that Masten was not armed seemed to drive his cold rage from him, and when he spoke again his voice was steely and contemptuous:

"You can hit the breeze, I reckon — I ain't murderin' anybody. You're safe right now. But I'm tellin' you this: I'm lookin' for you, an' you don't run no blazer in on me no more! After this, you go heeled — or you hit the breeze out

of the country. One of us has got to go. This country is too crowded with both of us!"

Masten got on his pony, trembling so that he had trouble in getting his feet into the stirrups. He rode on, hundreds of yards, before he dared to turn, so great was his dread that to do so would be to bring upon him the wrath of the man who had spared him. But finally he looked around. He saw Randerson riding out into the darkness of the vast stretch of grass-land that lay to the south.

CHAPTER XXII

INTO WHICH A GIRL'S TROUBLE COMES

UNCLE JEPSON and Aunt Martha had not seen Masten when he had visited Ruth, for they had gone in the buckboard to Red Rock. And Masten had departed when they reached home. Nor did they see Ruth after they arrived, for she had gone to bed. But at the breakfast table Ruth told them of the visit of Masten and of her plan to advance the date of the marriage.

Uncle Jepson and Aunt Martha received the news in silence. Aunt Martha did manage to proffer a half-hearted congratulation, but Uncle Jepson wrinkled his nose, as he did always when displeased, and said nothing; and he ate lightly. Ruth did not notice that she had spoiled his appetite, nor did she note with more than casual interest that he left the table long before she or Aunt Martha. She did not see him, standing at the corral fence, scowling, and she could not hear the old-fashioned profanity that gushed from his lips.

"Aren't you glad?" Ruth asked Aunt Martha when they were alone, for she had noted her relative's lack of enthusiasm.

"Why, yes, honey," Aunt Martha smiled at her, though it seemed forced. "Only —" She hesitated eloquently.

"Only what, Aunt Martha?" Ruth's voice was a little sharp, as with all persons who act in opposition to her better judgment and who resent anyone understanding them.

"Only I was hoping it would be Randerson, my dear," said Aunt Martha gently.

"Randerson!" Ruth's voice was scornful. But it sounded insincere to her, and she would trust it no further.

"Honey!" Aunt Martha's arm was around her, and Aunt Martha's sympathetic and knowing eyes were compelling hers; and her voice was ineffably gentle. "Are you sure, honey, that you don't wish it were Randerson? It is a great event in your life, dear, and once it is done, it can't be undone. Don't be hasty."

"It can never be Randerson," Ruth said firmly — not, however, as firmly as she had intended. "Randerson is a murderer — a reckless taker of human life!"

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"He *had* to shoot, they say," defended Aunt Martha. "I don't believe he would harm a living thing except in defense of his own life. Defending themselves is their way out here, girl — they know no other way. And he is a man, dear. I don't know when I have met a man who has impressed me more!"

"Please don't talk about it any more." Ruth's face was pale, her brows contracted, for Aunt Martha's reference to Randerson had brought back haunting sensations that, she thought, she had succeeded in putting out of her life. She was ready to cry, and when she thought of Randerson — how calmly he had accepted his dismissal, with what manliness he had borne her insults, a chill of sympathy ran over her. She believed she would never forget him as he had looked on the night he had ridden away after telling her that he would leave the Flying W — riding into the darkness of the plains, with his hopes blasted, bravely making no complaint.

She got her pony, after a while, and rode far and long, coming in to the ranchhouse about noon. After she had turned the pony into the corral and was coming toward the house, she saw Uncle Jepson sitting on the porch, puffing furiously at

his pipe. She spoke to him in greeting, and was about to pass him to go into the house, when he called to her:

"I want to talk to you a minute, Ruth." He spoke rapidly, his voice dry and light, and she could see his facial muscles twitching. Wonderingly, she sank into a chair near him.

"You're sure thinkin' of marryin' Masten, girl?" he said.

"Yes," she declared firmly.

"Well, then I've got to tell you," said Uncle Jepson decisively. "I've been puttin' it off, hopin' that you'd get shet of that imp of Satan, an' I wouldn't have to say anything."

"Uncle Jep!" she protested indignantly.

"That's just what he is, Ruth — a durned imp of the devil. I've knowed it from the first day I saw him. Since he's come out here, he's proved it." He swung his chair around and faced her, and forgetting his pipe in his excitement, he told her the story he had told Randerson: how he had gone into the messhouse on the day of the killing of Pickett, for a rest and a smoke, and how, while in there he had overheard Chavis and Pickett plotting against Randerson, planning Pickett's attack on her, mentioning Masten's connection

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with the scheme. She did not open her lips until Uncle Jepson had concluded, and then she murmured a low "Oh!" and sat rigid, gripping the arms of her chair.

"An' that ain't all, it ain't half of it!" pursued Uncle Jepson vindictively. "Do you know that Masten set that Watt Kelso, the gun-fighter, on Randerson?" He looked at Ruth, saw her start and draw a long breath, and he grinned triumphantly. "Course you don't know; I cal'late Randerson would never make a peep about it. He's all man — that feller. But it's a fact. Blair told me. There'd been bad blood between Randerson an' Kelso, an' Masten took advantage of it. He paid Kelso five hundred dollars in cold cash to kill Randerson!"

"Oh, it can't be!" moaned the girl, covering her face with her hands and shrinking into her chair.

"Shucks!" said Uncle Jepson derisively, but more gently now, for he saw that the girl was badly hurt. "The whole country is talkin' about it, Ruth, an' wonderin' why Randerson don't salivate that durned dude! An' the country expects him to do it, girl! They'll fun him out of here, if he don't! Why, girl," he went on, "you

don't know how much of a sneak a man can be when he's got it in him! "

She was shuddering as though he had struck her, and he was on the edge of his chair, looking at her pityingly, when Aunt Martha came to the door and saw them. She was out on the porch instantly, flushing with indignation.

"Jep Coakley, you're up to your tricks again, ain't you? You quit devilin' that girl, now, an' go on about your business! "

"I've got some things to say, an' I cal'late to say them! " declared Uncle Jepson determinedly. "I've kept still about it long enough. I ain't wantin' to hurt her," he added apologetically, as Aunt Martha slipped to her knees beside Ruth and put an arm around her, "but that durned Masten has been doin' some things that she's got to know about, right now. An' then, if she's set on marryin' him, why, I cal'late it's her business. It was Masten who was behind Pickett kissin' her — he tellin' Pickett to do it. An' he hired Kelso to kill Randerson."

"Oh, Ruth! " said Aunt Martha, her voice shaky, as she nestled her head close to the girl's. But her eyes shone with satisfaction.

"There's another thing," went on Uncle

Jepson to Ruth. "Did you notice Randerson's face, the night he come to hunt you, when you hurt your ankle? Marked up, kind of, it was, wasn't it? An' do you know what Masten went to Las Vegas for? Business, shucks! He went there to get his face nursed up, Ruth — because Randerson had smashed it for him! They'd had a fight; I saw them, both comin' from the same direction, that night. I reckon Randerson had pretty nigh killed him. What for?" he asked as Ruth turned wide, questioning eyes on him. "Well, I don't rightly know. But I've got suspicions. I've seen Masten goin' day after day through that break in the canyon over there. A hundred times, I cal'late. An' I've seen him here, when you wasn't lookin', kissin' that Catherson girl. I cal'late, if you was to ask her, she'd be able to tell you a heap more about Masten, Ruth."

Ruth got up, pale and terribly calm, disengaging herself from Aunt Martha and standing before Uncle Jepson. He too got to his feet.

Ruth's voice quavered. "You wouldn't, oh, you couldn't lie to me, Uncle, because you like Rex Randerson? Is it true?" She put her hands on his shoulders and shook him, excitedly.

" True? Why, Ruth, girl; it's as true as there's a Supreme Bein' above us. Why — "

But she waited to hear no more, turning from him and putting out her hands to keep Aunt Martha away as she passed her. She went out to the corral, got her pony, saddled it, mounted, and rode over the plains toward the break in the canyon wall. Uncle Jepson had one quick glimpse of her eyes as she turned from him, and he knew there would be no Monday for Willard Masten.

Ruth had no feelings as she rode. The news had stunned her. She had only one thought — to see Hagar Catherson, to confirm or disprove Uncle Jepson's story. She could not have told whether the sun was shining, or whether it was afternoon or morning. But she must see Hagar Catherson at once, no matter what the time or the difficulties. She came to the break in the canyon after an age, and rode through it, down across the bed of the river, over the narrow bridle path that led to the Catherson cabin.

The dog Nig did not greet her this time; he was stretched out on his belly, his hind legs gathered under him, his forelegs stuck out in front, his long muzzle extending along them, while he watched in apparent anxiety the face of his

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master, Abe Catherson, who was sitting on the edge of the porch, his elbows on his knees, his chin in his hands, in an attitude of deep dejection. The dog's concern was for Catherson's future actions, for just a few minutes before he had witnessed a scene that had made his hair bristle, had brought ugly growls out of him, had plunged him into such a state of fury that he had, for one wild instant, meditated a leap at his master's throat. He had seen his master leap upon his mistress and raise his hand to strike her. If the blow had been struck — Nig would have leaped, then, no matter what the consequences.

Catherson had not struck. But one great, dominating passion was in his mind at this moment—the yearning to slay! The dog had seen him, twice during the last half hour, draw out his heavy six-shooter and examine it, and each time the dog had growled his disapproval of the action. And on both occasions Catherson had muttered thickly: “I wish I knowed, for sure. A man can't do nothin' if he don't know. But I reckon it was him!”

He looked up to see Ruth coming toward him. The girl had seen him twice — had spoken to him. He was a bearded giant, grizzled, unkempt,

with hairy arms, massive and muscled superbly, and great hands, burned brown by the sun, that were just now clenched, forming two big fists. There had been a humorous, tolerant twinkle in his eyes on the other occasions that Ruth had seen him; it was as though he secretly sympathized with her efforts to do something for his girl, though he would not openly approve. But now she saw that his eyes were blazing with an insane frenzy, that his lips were working, and that the muscles of his neck stood out like great cords, strained to the bursting point.

He got up when he saw Ruth, and stood on the sand at the edge of the porch, swaying back and forth, and Ruth's first thought was that he had been drinking. But his first words to her revealed her mistake. It was the light, dry voice of a violent passion that greeted her, a passion that was almost too great for words. He ran to her pony and seized it by the bridle:

"You know, ma'am. Tell me who treated my li'l gal like that?" His great hands writhed in the reins. "I'll twist his buzzard's head off his shoulders."

"What do you mean?" Ruth's own voice startled her, for the spirit of a lie had issued from

her mouth; she knew what he meant; she realized that Uncle Jepson had told the truth.

"Don't you know, ma'am?" There was wild derision in his voice, insane mirth. "You've been comin' here; she's been goin' to your place! An' you don't know! You're blinder than me — an' I couldn't see at all!" He went off into a gale of frenzied laughter, at which the dog began to bark. Then Catherson's eyes glared cunningly. "But you've seen who's been comin' here; you know the man's name, ma'am; an' you're goin' to tell me, ain't you? So's I c'n talk to him — eh?"

"I don't know, Mr. Catherson." Ruth got a firm grip on herself before she answered, and it was to save a life that she lied again, for she saw murder in Catherson's eyes. "Where is Hagar?" she asked.

At his jerk of the head toward the cabin door Ruth got down from her pony. She was trembling all over, but at Catherson's words all thought of self had been banished. The effect of Masten's deed on her own life, his duplicity, his crimes — all were forgotten. Here was her friend who had been sinned against, needing the comfort of her presence. And in an instant she

was inside the cabin, leaning over the little figure that was curled up in a bunk in a corner, speaking low words of cheer and forgiveness.

Outside, Catherson paced back and forth, his lips forming soundless words, his big hands working as though the fingers were at the throat of the thief that had stolen into his home. His mind was going over certain words that Hagar had answered to his questions, just before Ruth's coming. He dwelt upon every slight circumstance that had occurred during the past few months. There were the tracks of horse's hoofs about the cabin, in the paths and trails leading to it. Hagar had refused to tell him. But he figured it all out for himself, as he walked. When had this thing started? At about the time that Randerson had taken Vickers' place at the Flying W! Why had not there been trouble between him and the Flying W, as under previous range bosses? What had Randerson given him money for, many times? Ah, he knew now!

"The black-hearted hound!" he gritted.

He reeled, and held to a corner of the cabin to steady himself, for this last access of rage came near to paralyzing him. When he recovered he drew back out of sight, and leaning against

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the wall of the cabin, with a pencil and a small piece of paper taken from a note book in a pocket, he wrote. He laid the piece of paper on the edge of the porch, ran to the corral and caught his pony, mounted, and rode drunkenly down the narrow path toward the break in the canyon.

CHAPTER XXIII

BANISHING A SHADOW

RANDERSON could not adjust his principles to his purpose to do Masten to death while working for Ruth, and so, in the morning following his meeting with the Easterner on the trail leading to Chavis' shack, he announced to the men of the outfit that he was going to quit. He told Red Owen to take charge until Ruth could see him.

Glum looks followed his announcement. They tried to dissuade him, for they did not know his thoughts, and perhaps would not have given him credit for them if they had.

"Don't the outfit suit you?" asked one gently. "If it don't, we'll try to do better!"

"Your conduct has been amazin' good — considerin'," grinned Randerson, light-hearted for the time; for this mark of affection was not lost upon him.

"If there's anybody in the outfit that's disagreeable to you, why, say the word an' we'll

make him look mighty scarce!" declared another, glancing belligerently around him.

"Shucks, this outfit'll be a blamed funeral!" said Blair. "We'll be gettin' to think that we don't grade up, nohow. First Vickers packs his little war-bag an' goes hittin' the breeze out; an' now you've got some fool notion that you ought to pull *your* freight. If it's anything botherin' you, why, open your yap, an' we'll sure salivate that thing!"

"I ain't mentionin'," said Randerson. "But it ain't you boys. You've suited me mighty well. I'm sure disturbed in my mind over leavin' you."

"Then why leave at all?" said Owen, his face long.

But Randerson evaded this direct question. "An' you standin' in line for my job?" he said in pretended astonishment. "Why, I reckon you ought to be the most tickled because I'm goin'!"

"Well, if it's a go, I reckon we'll have to stand for it," said Blair a little later, as Randerson mounted his pony. Their parting words were short, but eloquent in the sentiment left unsaid.

"So long," Randerson told them as he rode away. And "so long" came the chorus behind him, not a man omitting the courtesy.

THE RANGE BOSS

They stood in a group, watching him as he faded into the distance toward the ranchhouse.

"Somethin' is botherin' him mighty bad," said Owen, frowning.

"He's made the outfit feel like a lost doggie," grumbled Blair. "The blamed cuss is grievin' over somethin'." And they went disconsolately to their work.

Randerson rode on his way. He felt a little relieved. No longer was he bound by his job; he was now a free agent and could do as he pleased. And it would please him to settle his differences with Masten. He would "go gunnin' for him" with a vengeance.

It was about noon when he rode in to the ranchhouse. He did not turn his pony into the corral, but hitched it to one of the columns of the porch, for he intended to go on to the Diamond H as soon as he could get his belongings packed. If his old job was still open (he had heard that it was) he would take it, or another in case the old one had been filled. In any event, he would leave the Flying W.

Dejection was heavy in his heart when he crossed the porch to go to his room, for he had liked it here; it had been more like the home of

his ideals than any he had yet seen. For his imagination and affection had been at work, and in Aunt Martha he had seen a mother — such a mother as he could have wished his own to be, had she lived. And Uncle Jepson! The direct-talking old gentleman had captivated him; between them was respect, understanding, and admiration that could hardly have been deeper between father and son.

But he felt reluctant to tell them of his decision to go, he wanted to delay it — if possible, he did not want to let them know at all, for he could come here, sometimes, to see them, when Ruth had gone. And so he was much pleased when, entering the house, he did not see them. But he looked for them, to be certain, going into all the rooms. And finally from a kitchen window he saw them out in the cottonwood back of the house, walking arm in arm, away, deeper into the wood. He turned with a gentle smile, and went upstairs to his room.

Shortly after Abe Catherson's departure from the cabin, Ruth came to the door and looked out. Her face was whiter than it had been when she had reached the cabin, she was more composed,

and her eyes were alight with mingled resignation and thankfulness. For Hagar had yielded her secret, and Ruth had realized how near she had come to linking her life with that of the despicable creature who had preyed on her friend. The son of this great waste of world loomed big in her thoughts as she stood in the doorway; she saw now that those outward graces which had charmed her, in Masten, had been made to seem mockeries in contrast to the inward cleanness and manliness of the man that she had condemned for merely defending himself when attacked.

She went back into the cabin and sat beside Hagar, a queer sensation of joy possessing her, despite her pity for Hagar and her disgust for Masten, for she knew in this instant that she would never allow Randerson to quit the Flying W. Her joy was infectious; it brought a fugitive smile to the face of the nester's daughter, and as Ruth led her out upon the porch, her arms around her, Hagar looked at her worshipfully.

Out at the edge of the porch, Hagar shot a dreading glance around. She started, and her eyes filled with anxiety as her gaze rested on the corral. She seized Ruth's arm tightly.

"Dad's gone!" she said gulpingly.

“ Well, perhaps it is all for the best, Hagar,” consoled Ruth. “ He will ride for a while, and he will come back to forgive you.”

But the girl's eyes grew wide with fear. “ Oh, I'm afraid he'll do somethin' terrible! ” she faltered. “ Before you came, he asked me if — if it had been Randerson. I told him no, but he didn't seem satisfied, an' when I wouldn't tell him who it was, he went out, cursin' Rex. I'm afraid, Ruth — I'm afraid! ” She glanced wildly around, and her gaze rested on the piece of paper that Catherson had left on the edge of the porch. In an instant she had pounced upon it.

“ He's gone to kill Randerson! ” she screamed shrilly. She did not seem to see Ruth; the madness of hysterical fear was upon her; her eyes were brilliant, wide and glaring. She was in her bare feet, but she darted past Ruth, disregarding the rocks and miscellaneous litter that stretched before her, reached Ruth's pony and flung herself into the saddle, her lips moving soundlessly as she set the animal's head toward the path.

“ You stay here! ” she shouted to Ruth as the Flying W girl, stunned to inaction by the other's manner, watched her. “ I'm goin' to ketch dad. Oh, durn him, the mis'able hot head! ”

She hit the pony a vicious slap with a bare hand. It lunged, as the reins loosened, reaching its best speed within a hundred yards, but urged to increasing effort by voice and hand and heel, the girl leaning far over its mane, riding as she had never ridden before. But up at the Flying W ranchhouse, a tall, grim, bearded giant of a horseman was just dismounting, his pony trembling because of heart-breaking effort.

Randerson had not seen Ruth, of course. But he had wondered much over her whereabouts when he had been looking through the house for Uncle Jepson and Aunt Martha. And when he had seen them out in the cottonwoods, back of the house, he had supposed her to be with them. He was glad she was not here, to make these last moments embarrassing. He would not disturb her.

He found pencil and paper and wrote his resignation, sitting long over it, but making it brief. It read:

"I'm going, ma'am. I've left Red Owen in charge. I'm wishing you luck."

"There, that's settled," he said, rising. "But I was hopin' it would be different. Dreams are

silly things — when they don't come true. I'll be soured on girls, hereafter," he told himself, morosely.

He packed his war-bag. While engaged in this work he heard the sound of hoofbeats, but he paid no attention, though he colored uncomfortably, for he thought he had been wrong in thinking that Ruth had been in the cottonwood grove, and that she had been away and was just returning. And when he heard a soft tread downstairs he was certain that it was she, and he reddened again. He stopped his work and sat silent, then he caught the sound of footsteps on the stairs, for now he would have to face her. When he saw the door of his room begin to swing slowly back, he got up, his face grave, ready to deliver his resignation in person. And when the door swung almost open, and he saw Abe Catherston standing in the opening, his heavy pistol in hand, cocked, a finger on the trigger, he stiffened, standing silent, looking at the intruder.

Abe's eyes still wore the frenzy that had been in them when he had been speaking with Ruth. If anything, the frenzy was intensified. His legs were trembling, the big finger on the trigger of his weapon was twitching; his lips, almost hidden

by the beard, were writhing. He was like a man who had been seized by some terrible illness fighting it, resolved to conquer it through sheer effort. His voice stuck in his throat, issuing spasmodically:

“I’ve got you, Randerson,” he said, “where — I want you! I’m goin’ to kill you, empty my gun in you! You mis’able whelp!” He took two steps into the room and then halted, tearing at the collar of his shirt with his free hand, as though to aid his laboring lungs to get the air they demanded.

Randerson’s face was white and set, now. He was facing death at the hands of a man whom he had befriended many times. He did not know Catherson’s motive in coming here, but he knew that the slightest insincere word; a tone too light or too gruff, the most insignificant hostile movement, would bring about a quick pressure of the trigger of Catherson’s pistol. Diplomacy would not answer; it must be a battle of the spirit; naked courage alone could save him, could keep that big finger on the trigger from movement until he could discover Catherson’s motive in coming to kill him.

He had faced death many times, but never had

he faced it at the hands of a friend, with the strong drag of regard to keep his fingers from his own weapons. Had Catherson been an enemy, he would have watched him with different feelings; he would have taken a desperate chance of getting one of his own pistols to work. But he could not kill Catherson, knowing there was no reason for it.

He had no difficulty in getting genuine curiosity into his voice, and he kept it to just the pitch necessary to show his surprise over Catherson's threat and manner:

"What you reckonin' to kill me for, Abe?"

"For what you done to my Hagar!" The convulsive play of Catherson's features betrayed his nearness to action. His gun arm stiffened. He spoke in great gasps, like a man in delirium. "I want you to know — what for. You come — sneakin' — around — givin' me — money —"

"Steady, there, Abe!"

Randerson's sharp, cold voice acted with the effect of a dash of water in Catherson's face. He started, his big hand trembling, for though he had come to kill, he unknowingly wanted to hear some word from Randerson's lips in proof of his innocence. Had Randerson flinched, he would

have taken that as a sign of guilt, as he now took the man's sternness as an indication of his innocence. He stepped forward until he was no more than a foot from Randerson, and searched his face with wild intentness. And then, suddenly, the weapon in his hand sank down, his legs wavered, he leaned against the wall while his chin dropped to his chest.

"You didn't do it, Rex, you couldn't do it!" he muttered hoarsely. "No man who'd done a thing like that could look back at me like you looked. But I'm goin' to git—" He stopped, for there was a rapid patter of feet on the stairs, and a breathless voice, crying wildly:

"Dad! Dad! Dad!"

And while both men stood, their muscles tensed to leap into action in response to the voice, Hagar burst into the room, looked at them both; saw Catherson's drawn pistol, and then threw herself upon her father, hid her face on his breast and sobbed: "It wasn't Rex, dad; it was Masten!"

Catherson's excitement was over. The first terrible rage had expended itself on Randerson, and after a violent start at Hagar's words he grew cold and deliberate. Also, the confession

seemed to make his resentment against his child less poignant, for he rested his hand on her head and spoke gently to her:

"It's all right, Hagar — it's all right. Your old dad ain't goin' to hold it ag'in you too hard. We all make mistakes. Why, I was just goin' to make a mighty whopper myself, by killing Rex, here. You leave this to me." He pushed her toward Randerson. "You take her back to the shack, Rex. I reckon it won't take me long to do what I'm goin' to do. I'll be back afore dark, mebbe."

The girl clung to him for an instant. "Dad," she said. "What *are* you goin' to do?"

"If you was a good guesser —" said Catherson coldly. And then he grinned felinely at Randerson and went out. They could hear him going down the stairs. They followed presently, Hagar shrinking and shuddering under Randerson's arm on her shoulders, and from the porch they saw Catherson, on his pony, riding the trail that Ruth had taken on the day she had gone to see Chavis' shack.

Randerson got Hagar into the saddle, recognizing the pony and speaking about it. When she told him that Ruth was at her cabin, his face

lighted. He thought about the written resignation lying in his room, and he smiled.

“ I come mighty near not havin’ to use it,” he said to himself.

CHAPTER XXIV

REALIZING A PASSION

RUTH stood for a long time on the porch after Hagar's departure, gripped by emotions, that had had no duplicates in all her days. Never before had she thought herself capable of experiencing such emotions. For the man she loved was in danger. She knew at this minute that she loved him, that she had loved him all along. And she was not able to go to him; she could not even learn, until Hagar returned, whether the girl had been in time, or whether he had succumbed to the blind frenzy of the avenger. The impotence of her position did much to aggravate her emotions, and they surged through her, sapping her strength. It was hideous — the dread, the uncertainty, the terrible suspense, the dragging minutes. She walked back and forth on the porch, her hands clenched, her face drawn and white, praying mutely, fervently, passionately, that Hagar might be in time.

Thinking to divert her mind, she at last went

into the cabin and began to walk about, looking at various objects, trying to force herself to take an interest in them.

She saw, back of a curtain, a number of the dresses and other garments she had given Hagar, and she could not disperse the thought that perhaps if she had not given the clothing to Hagar, Masten might not have been attracted to her. She drew the curtain over them with something near a shudder, considering herself not entirely blameless.

She endeavored to interest herself in Cather-son's pipe and tobacco, on a shelf near the stove; wondering over the many hours that he had smoked in this lonesome place, driving away the monotony of the hours. What a blow this must be to him! She began to understand something of the terrible emotions that must have seized him with the revelation. And *she* had brought Masten here, too! Innocent, she was to blame there! And she unconsciously did something, as she walked about, that she had never before attempted to do — to put herself into other persons' positions, to try to understand their emotions — the motives that moved them to do things which she had considered vicious and in-

human. She had forced her imagination to work, and she succeeded in getting partial glimpses of the viewpoints of others, in experiencing flashes of the passions that moved them. She wondered what she would do were Hagar *her* daughter, and for an instant she was drunken with the intensity of the passion that gripped her.

Before her trip around the interior of the cabin was completed, she came upon a six-shooter — heavy, cumbersome, like the weapon she had used the day Randerson had taught her to shoot. It reposed on a shelf near the door that led to the porch, and was almost concealed behind a box in which were a number of miscellaneous articles, broken pipes, pieces of hardware, buckles, a file, a wrench. She examined the weapon. It was loaded, in excellent condition. She supposed it was left there for Hagar's protection. She restored it to its place and continued her inspection.

She had grown more composed now, for she had had time to reflect. Catherson had not had much of a start; he would not ride so fast as Hagar; he did not know where, on the range, he might find Randerson. Hagar was sure to catch him; she *would* catch him, because of her deep

affection for Randerson. And so, after all, there was nothing to worry about.

She was surprised to discover that she could think of Masten without the slightest regret; to find that her contempt for him did not cause her the slightest wonder. Had she always known, subconsciously, that he was a scoundrel? Had that knowledge exerted its influence in making her reluctant to marry him?

Standing at a rear window she looked out at the corral, and beyond it at a dense wood. She had been there for about five minutes, her thoughts placid, considering the excitement of the day, when at a stroke a change came over her. At first a vague disquiet, which rapidly grew into a dread fear, a conviction, that some danger lurked behind her.

She was afraid to turn. She did not turn, at once, listening instead for any sound that might confirm her premonition. No sound came. The silence that reigned in the cabin was every bit as intense as that which surrounded it. But the dread grew upon her; a cold chill raced up her spine, spreading to her arms and to her hands, making them cold and clammy; to her head, whitening her face, making her temples throb.

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And then, when it seemed that she must shriek in terror, she turned. In the doorway, leaning against one of the jambs, regarding her with narrowed, gleaming eyes, a pleased, appraising smile on his face, was Tom Chavis.

Her first sensation was one of relief. She did not know what she had expected to see when she turned; certainly something more dire and terrible than Tom Chavis. But when she thought of his past actions, of his cynical, skeptical, and significant looks at her; of his manner at this minute; and reflected upon the fact that she was alone, she realized that chance could have sent nothing more terrible to her.

He noted her excitement, and his smile broadened. "Scared?" he said. "Oh, don't be." His attitude toward her became one of easy assurance. He stepped inside and walked to the rough table that stood near the center of the room, placing his hands on it and looking at her craftily.

"Nobody here," he said, "but you — eh? Where's Catherson? Where's Hagar?"

"They've gone to the Flying W," she answered, trying to make her voice even, but not succeeding. There was a quaver in it. "You

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must have seen them," she added, with a hope that some one at the ranchhouse might have seen *him*. She would have felt more secure if she had known that someone *had* seen him.

"Nothin' doin'," he said, a queer leap in his voice. "I come straight from the shack, by the Lazette trail. How does it come that you're here, alone? What did Catherson an' Hagar go to the Flyin' W for? How long will they be gone?"

"They will be back right away," she told him, with a devout hope that they would.

"You're lyin', Ruth," he said familiarly. "You don't know when they'll be back." He grinned, maliciously. "I reckon I c'n tell you why you're here alone, too. Hagar's took your cayuse. Hagar's is in the corral. You see," he added triumphantly as he saw the start that she could not repress. "I've been nosin' around a little before I come in. I wasn't figgerin' on runnin' into Abe Catherson." He laughed thickly, as though some sort of passion surged over him. "So you're all alone here — eh?"

She grew weak at the significance of his words, and leaned against the window-sill for support. And then with the realization that she must not

seem to quail before him, she stood erect again and forced her voice to steadiness.

"Yes," she said, "I am alone. Is there any need to repeat that? And being alone, I am in charge, here, and I don't want you here for company."

He laughed, making no move to withdraw.

"I'm here on business."

"You can't have any business with me. Come when the Cathersons are here."

"The waitin's good," he grinned. He walked around to the side of the table, and with one hand resting on its top, looked closely at her, suspicion in his eyes. "Say," he said in a confidential whisper, "it looks peculiar to me. Catherson an' Hagar both gone. Hagar's got your cayuse, leavin' you here alone. Has ol' Catherson tumbled to Masten bein' thick with Hagar?"

"I don't know," she said, flushing. "It is no affair of mine!"

"It ain't — eh?" he said with a laugh, low and derisive. "You don't care what Masten does — eh? An' you're goin' to marry him, Monday. Masten's lucky," he went on, giving her a look that made her shudder; "he's got two girls. An'

one of them don't care how much he loves the other." He laughed as though the matter were one of high comedy.

His manner, the half-veiled, vulgar significance of his words and voice, roused her to a cold fury. She took a step toward him and stood rigid, her eyes flashing.

"You get out of this cabin, Tom Chavis!" she commanded. "Get out — instantly!" No longer was she afraid of him; she was resolute, unflinching.

But Chavis merely smiled — seemingly in huge enjoyment. And then, while he looked at her, his expression changed to wonder. "Holy smoke!" he said. "Where's Masten's eyes? He said you didn't have any spirit, Ruth, that you was too cold an' distant. I reckon Masten don't know how to size up a girl — a girl, that is, which is thoroughbred. Seems as though his kind is more like Hagar!" He grinned cunningly and reached into a pocket, drawing out a paper. He chuckled over it, reading it. Then, as though she were certain to appreciate the joke, he held it out to her. "Read it, Ruth," he invited, "it's from Masten, askin' Hagar to meet him, to-morrow, down the crick a ways. He's dead scared

to come here any more, since Randerson's aimin' to perforate him! "

Only one conscious emotion afflicted her at this minute: rage over Chavis' inability to understand that she was not of the type of woman who could discuss such matters with a man. Evidently, in his eyes, all women were alike. She knew that such was his opinion when, refusing to take the paper, she stepped back, coldly, and he looked at her in surprise, a sneer following instantly.

" Don't want to read it — eh? Not interested? Jealous, mebbe — eh? " He grinned. " Sure — that's it, you're jealous." He laughed gleefully. " You women are sure jokes. Masten can't wake you up — eh? Well, mebbe Masten — " He paused and licked his lips. " I reckon I don't blame you, Ruth. Masten ain't the sort of man. He's too cold-blooded, hisself to make a woman sort of fan up to him. But there's other guys in this country, Ruth, an'— "

She had seized the first thing that came to her hands, a glass jar that had set on the window sill behind her, and she hurled it furiously and accurately. It struck him fairly on the forehead and broke into many pieces, which clattered and rang

on the bare board floor. The sound they made, the smashing, dull impact as the jar had struck Chavis, caused her heart to leap in wild applause — twanging a cord of latent savagery in her that set her nerves singing to its music. It was the first belligerent act of her life. It awakened in her the knowledge that she could defend herself, that the courage for which she had prayed that night when on the rock where Randerson had found her, was lurking deep, ready to answer her summons. She laughed at Chavis, and when she saw him wipe the blood from his face and look at her in bewilderment, she challenged him peremptorily:

“Go — now, you beast!”

His answer was a leering grin that made his face hideous. He looked like a wounded animal, with nothing but concentrated passion in his eyes. Her act had maddened him.

“I’ll fix you, you hussy!” he sneered cursing.

She saw now that he was aroused past all restraint, and when he came toward her, crouching, she knew that other missiles would not suffice, that to be absolutely safe she must get possession of the big pistol that reposed on the shelf near the door. So when he came toward her she

slipped behind the table. He grasped it by its edge and tried to swing it out of the way, and when she held it he suddenly swooped down, seizing it by the legs and overturning it. As it fell he made a lunge at her, but she eluded him and bounded to the door. The box holding the miscellaneous articles she knocked out of its place, so that it fell with a tinkling crash, throwing its contents in all directions. Her fingers closed on the stock of the pistol, and she faced Chavis, who was a few feet away, leveling the big weapon at him. Her voice came firmly; she was surprised at her own calmness:

“Don’t move, Chavis, don’t dare to take a step, or I’ll kill you!”

Chavis halted, his face a dirty, chalkish white. Twice his lips opened, in astonishment or fear, she could not tell which, but no sound came from them. He stood silent, watching her, furtive-eyed, crouching.

In this interval her thoughts rioted in chaos, like dust before a hurricane. But a question dominated all: could she carry out her threat to kill Chavis, if he took the step?

She knew she would. For in this crisis she had discovered one of nature’s first laws. She had

never understood, before, but in the last few minutes knowledge had come to her like a burst of light in the darkness. And a voice came to her also — Randerson's; she mentally repeated the words he had spoken on the day he had told her about the rustlers: "I reckon you'd fight like a tiger, ma'am, if the time ever come when you had to."

Yes, she would fight. Not as a tiger would fight, but as Randerson himself had fought — not with a lust to do murder, but in self-protection. And in this instant the spirit of Randerson seemed to stand beside her, applauding her, seeming to whisper words of encouragement to her. And she caught something of his manner when danger threatened; his cold deliberation, his steadiness of hand and eye, his grim alertness. For she had unconsciously studied him in the few minutes preceding the death of Pickett, and she was as unconsciously imitating him now.

Her thoughts ceased, however, when she saw Chavis grin at her, mockingly.

"It's a bluff!" he said. "You couldn't hit the ground, if you had a-hold of the gun with both hands!" He moved slightly, measuring the distance between them.

Plainly, she saw from his actions, from his tensed muscles, her threat would not stop him. She was very pale, and her breast heaved as though from a hard run; Chavis could hear the sound of her breathing as he set himself for a leap; but her lips were pressed tightly together, her eyes glowed and widened as she followed the man's movements. She was going to kill; she had steeled her mind to that. And when she saw the man's muscles contract for the rush that he hoped would disconcert her, she fired, coolly and deliberately.

With the deafening roar of the weapon in her ears, a revulsion, swift, sickening, overcame her. The report reverberated hideously; she seemed to hear a thousand of them. And the smoke billowed around her, strong, pungent. Through it she saw Chavis stagger, clap one hand to his chest and tumble headlong, face down, at her feet. The interior of the cabin whirled in mad circles; the floor seemed to be rising to meet her, and she sank to it, the six-shooter striking the bare boards with a thud that sounded to her like a peal of thunder. And then oblivion, deep and welcome, descended.

Coming down through the break in the canyon,

riding slightly in advance of Hagar, Randerson heard the report of a pistol, distant and muffled. He turned in the saddle and looked at Hagar questioningly.

"That come from your shack!" he said shortly; "Ruth there alone?"

He caught the girl's quick affirmative, and Patches leaped high in the air from pain and astonishment as the spurs pressed his flanks. When he came down it was to plunge forward with furious bounds that sent him through the water of the river, driving the spume high over his head. He scrambled up the sloping further bank like a cat, gained the level and straightened to his work. Twice that day had riders clattered the narrow trail with remarkable speed, but Patches would have led them.

He was going his best when within fifty feet of the shack he heard Randerson's voice and slowed down. Even then, so great was his impetus, he slid a dozen feet when he felt the reins, rose to keep from turning a somersault, and came down with a grunt.

In an instant Randerson was inside the cabin. Ruth lay prone, where she had fallen. Randerson, pale, grim-lipped, leaned over her.

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"Fainted!" he decided. He stepped to the man and turned him over roughly.

"Chavis," he ejaculated, his lips hardening. "Bored a-plenty!" he added, with vindictive satisfaction. He saw Ruth's weapon, noted the gash in Chavis' forehead, and smiled. "I reckon she fit like a tiger, all right!" he commented admiringly. And now he stood erect and looked down at Ruth compassionately. "She's killed him, but she'll die a-mournin' over it!" Swift resolution made his eyes flash. He looked again at Ruth, saw that she was still in a state of deep unconsciousness.. Running out of the cabin, he drew one of his six-shooters. When he had gone about twenty-five feet from the edge of the porch, he wheeled, threw the gun to a quick level, and aimed at the interior of the cabin. At the report he ran toward the cabin again, to meet Hagar, just riding up, wide-eyed and wondering.

"What is goin' on?" she demanded. "What you doin'?"

"Killin' a man," he told her grimly. He seized her by the shoulders. "Understand," he said sternly; "*I* killed him, no matter what happens. I'd just got here."

With Hagar at his heels he entered the cabin

again. While the girl worked with Ruth, he went to the rear wall of the cabin and examined it. When shooting from the outside he had aimed at the wall near a small mirror that was affixed there, and his eyes gleamed with satisfaction when, embedded in one of the logs that formed the wall, he found the bullet.

Five minutes later he and Hagar led Ruth out on the porch. The girl was shaking and cringing, but trying hard to bear up under the recollection of her terrible experience. She had looked, once, at Chavis, on the floor of the cabin, when she had recovered, and her knees had sagged. But Randerson had gone to her assistance. She had looked at him, too, in mute agony of spirit, filled with a dull wonder over his presence, but gaining nothing from his face, sternly sympathetic. Outside, in the brilliant sunshine, a sense of time, place, and events came back to her, and for the first time since her recovery she thought of Abe Catherson's note, which Hagar had read.

"Oh," she said, looking at Randerson with luminous eyes, joy flashing in them, "he didn't shoot you!"

"I reckon not, ma'am," he grinned. "I'm still able to keep on range bossin' for the Flyin' W."

"Yes, yes!" she affirmed with a gulp of delight. And she leaned her head a little toward him, so that it almost touched his arm. And he noted, with a pulse of pleasure, that the grip of her hand on the arm tightened.

But her joy was brief; she had only put the tragedy out of her mind for an instant. It returned, and her lips quavered.

"I killed Chavis, Randerson," she said, looking up at him with a pitiful smile. "I have learned what it means to — to take — human life. I killed him, Rex! I shot him down just as he was about to spring upon me! But I had to do it — didn't I?" she pleaded. "I — I couldn't help it. I kept him off as long as I could — and nobody came — and he looked so terrible —"

"I reckon you've got things mixed, ma'am." Randerson met her puzzled look at him with a grave smile. "It was me, ma'am, killed him."

She drew a sharp breath, her cheeks suddenly flooded with color; she shook Hagar's arm from around her waist, seized Randerson's shoulders, gripping the sleeves of his shirt hard and staring at him, searching his eyes with eager, anxious intensity.

"Don't lie to me, Randerson," she pleaded. "Oh," she went on, reddening as she thought of another occasion when she had accused him, "I know you wouldn't — I know you *never* did! But I killed him; I know I did! For I shot him, Randerson, just as he started to leap at me. And I shall never forget the look of awful surprise and horror in his eyes! I shall never get over it — I will never forgive myself!"

"Shucks, ma'am, you're plumb excited. An' I reckon you was more excited then, or you'd know better than to say you did it. Me an' Hagar was just gettin' off our horses here at the door — after comin' from the Flyin' W. An' I saw Tom Chavis in the cabin. He was facin' the door, ma'am," he said at a venture, and his eyes gleamed when he saw her start, "an' I saw what he was up to. An' I perforated him, ma'am. From outside, here. Your gun went off at the same time. But you ain't learned to shoot extra good yet, an' your bullet didn't hit him. I'll show you where it's stuck, in the wall."

He led her inside and showed her the bullet. And for a short space she leaned her head against the wall and cried softly. And then, her eyes filled with dread and doubt, she looked up at him.

"Are you sure that is my bullet?" she asked, slowly. She held her breath while awaiting his answer.

It was accompanied by a short laugh, rich in grave humor:

"I reckon you wouldn't compare your shootin' with *mine*, ma'am. Me havin' so much experience, an' you not bein' able to hit a soap-box proper?"

She bowed her head and murmured a fervent:

"Thank God!"

Randerson caught Hagar's gaze and looked significantly from Ruth to the door. The girl accepted the hint, and coaxed Ruth to accompany her to the door and thence across the porch to the clearing. Randerson watched them until, still walking, they vanished among the trees. Then he took Chavis' body out. Later, when Ruth and Hagar returned, he was sitting on the edge of the porch, smoking a cigarette.

To Ruth's insistence that Hagar come with her to the house, the girl shook her head firmly.

"Dad will be back, most any time. He'll feel a heap bad, I reckon. An' I've got to be here."

A little later, riding back toward the Flying W — when they had reached the timber-fringed

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level where, on another day, Masten had received his thrashing, Ruth halted her pony and faced her escort.

"Randerson," she said, "today Uncle Jepson told me some things that I never knew — about Masten's plots against you. I don't blame you for killing those men. And I am sorry that I — I spoke to you as I did — that day." She held out a hand to him.

He took it, smiling gravely. "Why, I reckoned you never meant it," he said.

"And," she added, blushing deeply; "you are not going to make it necessary for me to find another range boss, are you?"

"I'd feel mighty bad if you was to ask me to quit now," he grinned. And now he looked at her fairly, holding her gaze, his eyes glowing. "But as for bein' range boss —" He paused, and a subtle gleam joined the glow in his eyes. "There's a better job — that I'm goin' to ask you for — some day. Don't you think that I ought to be promoted, ma'am?"

She wheeled her pony, blushing, and began to ride toward the ranchhouse. But he urged Patches beside her, and, reaching out, he captured the hand nearest him. And in this manner they

rode on — he holding the hand, a thrilling exultation in his heart, she with averted head and downcast eyes, filled with a deep wonder over the new sensation that had come to her.

Uncle Jepson, in the doorway of the house, eagerly watching for the girl's return, saw them coming. Stealthily he closed the door and slipped out into the kitchen, where Aunt Martha was at work.

"Women is mighty uncertain critters, ain't they, Ma?" he said, shaking his head as though puzzled over a feminine trait that had, heretofore, escaped his notice. "I cal'late they never know what they're goin' to do next."

Aunt Martha looked at him over the rims of her spectacles, wonderment in her gaze — perhaps a little belligerence.

"Jep Coakley," she said severely, "you're always runnin' down the women! What on earth do you live with one for? What are the women doin' now, that you are botherin' so much about?"

He gravely took her by the arm and pointed out of a window, from which Ruth and Randerson could be seen.

Aunt Martha looked, long and intently. And

when she finally turned to Uncle Jepson, her face was radiant, and she opened her arms to him.

"Oh, Jep!" she exclaimed lowly, "ain't that wonderful!"

"I cal'late I've been expectin' it," he observed.

CHAPTER XXV

A MAN IS BORN AGAIN

THE meeting between Catherson and Randerson had taken the edge off Catherson's frenzy, but it had not shaken his determination. He had been in the grip of an insane wrath when he had gone to see the Flying W range boss. His passions had ruled him, momentarily. He had subdued them, checked them; they were held in the clutch of his will as he rode the Lazette trail. He did not travel fast, but carefully. There was something in the pony's gait that suggested the mood of his rider — a certain doggedness of movement and demeanor which might have meant that the animal knew his rider's thoughts and was in sympathy with them. They traveled the trail that Randerson had taken on the night he had found Ruth on the rock; they negotiated the plain that spread between the ranchhouse and the ford where Randerson had just missed meeting Ruth that day; they went steadily over the hilly country and passed through the section of broken

land where Ruth's pony had thrown her. Reaching the hills and ridges beyond, Catherson halted and scrutinized the country around him. When he observed that there was no sign of life within range of his vision, he spoke to the pony and they went forward.

Catherson's lips were set in a heavy, ugly pout. His shaggy brows were contracted; somber, baleful flashes, that betrayed something of those passions that he was subduing, showed in his eyes as the pony skirted the timber where Rander-son had tied Ruth's horse. When he reached the declivity where Ruth had overheard Chavis and Kester, he dismounted and led his pony down it, using the utmost care. He was conserving the pony's strength. For he knew nothing of what might be required of the animal, and this thing which he had determined to do must not be bungled.

He was still in no hurry, but he grew cautious now, and secretive. He made a wide circuit of the basin, keeping out of sight as much as possible, behind some nondescript brush, riding in depressions; going a mile out of his way to follow the sandy bed of a washout. His objective was Chavis' shack, and he wanted to come upon it

unnoticed. Or, if that failed, he desired to make his visit appear casual.

But in Chavis' shack was a man who of late had formed the habit of furtive watchfulness. He wore a heavy six-shooter at his waist, but he knew better than to try to place any dependence upon his ability as a marksman. A certain meeting with a grim-faced man on the Lazette trail the night before, a vivid recollection of the grim-faced man's uncanny cleverness with a weapon, demonstrated upon two occasions, worried him, as did also some words that kept running through his mind, asleep or awake, and would not be banished. He could even hear the intonations of the voice that had uttered them: "This country is too crowded for both of us."

Masten was beginning to believe that. He had thought that very morning, of leaving, of escaping, rather. But Chavis had reassured him, had ridiculed him, in fact.

"Randerson's four-flushin'," Chavis had laughed. "He's took a shine to Ruth, an' he's aimin' to scare you out. He'd sooner shoot a foot off than bore you. 'Cause why? 'Cause if he bored you he'd never have no chance to get next

to Ruth. She's some opposed to him killin' folks promiscuous. You lay low, that's all. An' I'll rustle up a guy one of these days which will put a crimp in Randerson. If he comes snoopin' around here, why, there's a rifle handy. Let him have it, sudden — before he can git set! "

Since he had sent Chavis with the note to Hagar, Masten had been uneasy. He had not stayed inside the shack for more than a minute or two at a time, standing much in the doorway, scanning the basin and the declivity carefully and fearfully. And he had seen Catherson lead his pony down. He went in and took the rifle from its pegs.

He had had a hope, at first, that it might be Kester or Linton. But when he saw that the rider did not come directly toward the shack a cold sweat broke out on his forehead and he fingered the rifle nervously. When he saw the rider disappear in the washout, he got a chair from inside and, standing on it, concentrated his gaze at the point where the rider must emerge. And when, a little later, he caught a glimpse of the rider's head, appearing for just an instant above the crest of a sand ridge, noting the beard and the shaggy hair, his face turned ashen and the chair rocked

under him. For he knew but one man in this country who looked like that.

He got down from the chair and glared around, his eyes dilated. Catherson's actions seemed innocent enough. But what could he be doing in the basin? And, once here, what could he mean by prowling like that, instead of coming directly to the cabin? What could he be looking for? Why did he not show himself?

Masten slipped outside and crept along the wall of the shack to a corner, from which, screened by some alder, he watched breathlessly, a nameless disquiet oppressing him. Did Catherson know anything?

That question his conscience dinned in his ears. It was answered many times, as he stood there — an insistent affirmative, suggested, proven by Catherson's actions, supported by the fact that he had never seen Catherson in the basin before.

As he watched, he saw Catherson again. He was closer, riding behind a thicket of gnarled brush, which was not high enough entirely to conceal him, and he was bending far over in the saddle as though he did not want to be seen. But Masten could see him, and this last evidence of the man's caution convinced Masten. Obeying

a sudden impulse, he threw the rifle to his shoulder. The muzzle wavered, describing wide circles, and before he could steady it enough to be reasonably certain of hitting the target, Catherson had vanished behind a low hill.

Masten wiped the cold moisture from his forehead. For an instant he stood irresolute, trembling. And then, panic-stricken over a picture that his imagination drew for him, he dropped the rifle and ran, crouching, to the corral. With frenzied haste, urged by the horrible conviction that had seized him, he threw saddle and bridle on his pony, and clambered, mumbling incoherently, into the saddle. Twice the reins escaped his wild clutches, but finally he caught them and sat erect looking fearfully for Catherson.

The nester was not visible to him. Gulping hard, Masten sent the pony cautiously forward. He skirted the corral fence, keeping the shack between him and the point at which he divined Catherson was then riding, and loped the pony into some sparse timber near the river.

His panic had grown. He had yielded to it, and it had mastered him. His lips were twitching; he cringed and shivered as, getting deeper

into the timber, he drove the spurs into the pony's flanks and raced it away from the shack.

He rode for perhaps a mile at break-neck speed. And then, unable to fight off the fascination that gripped him, doubting, almost ridiculing himself for yielding to the wild impulse to get away from Catherson, for now that he was away his action seemed senseless, he halted the pony and turned in the saddle, peering back through the trees. He had followed a narrow trail, and its arching green stretched behind him, peaceful, inviting, silent. So calm did it all seem to him now, so distant from that dread danger he had anticipated, that he smiled and sat debating an impulse to return and face Catherson. The man's intentions could not be what he had suspected them to be; clearly, his conscience had played him a trick.

But he did not wheel his pony. For as he sat there in the silence he heard the rapid drumming of hoofs on the path. Distant they were, but unmistakable. For a moment Masten listened to them, the cold damp breaking out on his forehead again. Then he cursed, drove the spurs deep into the pony and leaning forward, rode frantically away.

Coming out of the timber to a sand plain that stretched in seeming endlessness toward a horizon that was dimming in the growing twilight, Masten halted the pony again, but only for an instant. In the next he was urging it on furiously. For looking back fearfully, he saw Catherson bestriding his pony, a dread apparition, big, rigid, grim, just breaking through the timber edge, not more than two or three hundred feet distant. Masten had hoped he had distanced his pursuer, for he had ridden at least five miles at a pace that he had never before attempted. There had been no way for him to judge the pony's speed, of course, but when he had halted momentarily he had noted that the animal was quivering all over, that it caught its breath shrilly in the brief interval of rest, and now as he rode, bending far over its mane, he saw that the billowing foam on its muzzle was flecked with blood. The animal was not equal to the demands he had made upon it.

But he forced it on, with spur and voice and hand, muttering, pleading with it incoherently, his own breath coughing in his throat, the muscles of his back cringing and rippling in momentary expectation of a flying missile that would burn and tear its way through them. But no bullet

came. There was no sound behind him except, occasionally, the ring of hoofs. At other times silence engulfed him. For in the deep sand of the level the laboring ponies of pursued and pursuer made no noise. Masten could hear a sodden squish at times, as his own animal whipped its hoofs out of a miniature sand hill.

He did not look around again for a long time. Long ago had he lost all sense of direction, for twilight had come and gone, and blank darkness, except for the stars, stretched on all sides. He had never seen this sand level; he knew it must be far off the Lazette trail. And he knew, too, before he had ridden far into it, that it was a desert. For as twilight had come on he had scrutinized it hopefully in search of timber, bushes, a gorge, a gully — anything that might afford him an opportunity for concealment, for escape from the big, grim pursuer. He had seen nothing of that character. Barren, level, vast, this waste of world stretched before him, with no verdure save the repulsive cactus, the scraggy yucca, the greasewood, and occasional splotches of mesquite.

They raced on, the distance between them lessening gradually. Masten could feel his pony failing. It tried bravely, but the times when it

spurted grew less frequent; it made increasingly harder work of pulling its hoofs out of the deep sand; it staggered and lurched on the hard stretches.

Masten looked back frequently now. The grim, relentless figure behind him grew grotesque and gigantic in his thoughts, and once, when he felt the pony beneath him go to its knees, he screamed hysterically. But the pony clambered to its feet again and staggered on, to fall again a minute later. Catherson's pony, its strength conserved for this ordeal, came on steadily, its rider carefully avoiding the soft sand, profiting by Masten's experiences with it. It was not until he saw Catherson within fifty feet of him that Masten divined that he was not to be shot. For at that distance he made a fair target, and Catherson made no movement toward his gun. The nester was still silent; he had spoken no word. He spoke none now, as he hung relentlessly to his prey, seeming, to Masten's distorted mind and vision, a hideous, unnatural and ghastly figure of death.

Catherson had drawn nearer. He was not more than thirty feet away when Masten's pony went down again. It fell with a looseness and

finality that told Masten of the end. And Masten slipped his feet out of the stirrups, throwing himself free and alighting on his hands and knees in front of the exhausted animal. He got up, and started to run, desperately, sobbing, his lips slavered from terror. But he turned, after running a few feet, to see Catherson coming after him. The nester was uncoiling a rope from his saddle horn, and at this sight Masten shrieked and went to his knees. He heard an answering laugh from Catherson, short, malevolent. And then the rope swished out, its loop widening and writhing. Masten shrieked again, and threw up his hands impotently.

Later, Catherson brought his pony to a halt, far from where the rope had been cast, and looked grimly down at his fellow being, prone and motionless in the deep sand at his feet.

Unmoved, remorseless, Catherson had cut short the pleadings, the screaming, the promises. He had not bungled his work, and it had been done. But as he looked down now, the muscles of his face quivered. And now he spoke the first word that had passed his lips since he had left the Flying W ranchhouse:

"I reckon you've got what's been comin' to you!"

He got down, unfastened the rope, deliberately re-coiled it and looped it around the saddle horn. Then he mounted and rode away. Grim, indistinct, fading into the blackness of the desert night, he went, half a mile, perhaps. And then, halting the pony, he turned in the saddle and looked back, his head bent in a listening attitude. To his ears came the sharp bark of a coyote, very near. It was answered, faintly, from the vast, yawning distance, by another. Catherson stiffened, and lines of remorse came into his face.

"Hell!" he exclaimed gruffly.

He wheeled the pony and sent it scampering back. A little later he was kneeling at Masten's side, and still later he helped Masten to the saddle in front of him and set out again into the desert blackness toward the timber from which they both had burst some time before.

Many hours afterward they came to the river, at the point where the Lazette trail intersected. There, in the shallow water of the ford, Masten washed from his body the signs of his experience, Catherson helping him. Outwardly, when they had finished, there were few marks on

Masten. But inwardly his experience had left an ineffaceable impression.

After washing, he staggered to a rock and sat on it, his head in his hands, shivers running over him. For a time Catherson paid no attention to him, busying himself with his pony, jaded from the night's work. But after half an hour, just as the first faint shafts of dawn began to steal up over the horizon, Catherson walked close, and stood looking down at his victim.

"Well," he said, slowly and passionlessly, "I've got you this far. I'm quittin' you. I reckon I've deviled you enough. I was goin' to kill you. But killin' you wouldn't have made things right. I expect you've learned somethin', anyway. You'll know enough to play square, after this. An' wherever you go —"

Masten looked up at him, his face haggard, his eyes brimming, but flashing earnestly.

"I'm going back to Hagar," he said. He shivered again. "You're right, Catherson," he added, his voice quavering; "I learned a lot tonight. I've learned —" His voice broke, and he sat there grim and white, shuddering as a child shudders when awakened from a nightmare. He almost collapsed when Catherson's huge hands

fell to his shoulders, but the hands held him, the fingers gripping deeply into the flesh. There was a leap in Catherson's voice:

"You're almost a man, after all!" he said.

They got on the pony after a while, riding as before, Masten in front, Catherson behind him, steadying him. And in this manner they rode on toward Catherson's shack, miles down the river.

It was late in the morning when they came in sight of the shack, and seeing them from afar Hagar ran to them. She stopped when she saw Masten, her eyes wide with wonder and astonishment that changed quickly to joy as she saw a smile gathering on Catherson's face.

"I've brought you your husband, Hagar," he told her.

Hagar did not move. Her hands were pressing her breast; her eyes were eloquent with doubt and hope. They sought Masten's, searchingly, defiantly. And she spoke directly to him, proudly, her head erect:

"If you've come ag'in your will — If dad had to bring you —" She paused, her lips trembling.

"Shucks," said Catherson gently; "he's come on his own hook, Hagar. Why, he asked me to bring him — didn't you, Masten?"

And then he dismounted and helped Masten down, leading his pony forward toward the shack, but turning when he reached the porch, to look back at Masten and Hagar, standing together in the shade of the trees, the girl's head resting on the man's shoulder.

Catherson pulled the saddle and bridle from the pony, turned him into the corral, and then went into the house. A little later he came out again, smoking a pipe. Masten and Hagar were sitting close together on a fallen tree near where he had left them. Catherson smiled mildly at them and peacefully pulled at his pipe.

CHAPTER XXVI

A DREAM COMES TRUE

ON the edge of the mesa, from which, on the day of her adventure with the injured ankle, Ruth had viewed the beautiful virgin wilderness that stretched far on the opposite side of the river, she was riding, the afternoon of a day a week later, with Randerson. She had expressed a wish to come here, and Randerson had agreed joyfully.

Seated on a rock in the shade of some trees that formed the edge of that timber grove in which he had tied Ruth's pony on a night that held many memories for both, they had watched, for a long time, in silence, the vast country before them. Something of the solemn calmness of the scene was reflected in Ruth's eyes. But there was a different expression in Randerson's eyes. It was as though he possessed a secret which, he felt, she ought to know, but was deliberately delaying the telling of it. But at last he decided, though he began obliquely:

"I reckon there's a set plan for the way things turn out — for folks," he said, gravely. "Things turn out to show it. Everything is fixed." He smiled as she looked at him. "Take me," he went on. "I saw your picture. If I'd only seen it once, mebbe I wouldn't have fell in love with it. But —"

"Why, Rex!" she reproved with an injured air, "how can you say that? Why, I believe I loved you from the minute I saw you!"

"You didn't have anything on me there!" he told her. "For I was a gone coon the first time I set eyes on *you*! But is it the same with pictures? A picture, now, has to be studied; it ain't like the real article," he apologized. "Anyway, if I hadn't kept lookin' at your picture, mebbe things would have been different. But I got it, an' I looked at it a lot. That shows that it was all fixed for you an' me."

She looked mirthfully at him. "Was it all fixed for you to take the picture from Vickers, by force — as you told me you did?" she demanded.

He grinned brazenly. "I reckon that was part of the plan," he contended. "Anyway, I got it. Vickers wouldn't speak to me for a month, but I reckon I didn't lose any sleep over that.

What sleep I lost was lost lookin' at the picture." The confession did not embarrass him, for he continued quietly:

"An' there's Masten." He watched the smile go out of her face with regret in his eyes. But he went on. "I intended to kill him, one night. But he had no gun, an' I couldn't. That would have spoiled the plan that's fixed for all of us. I let him live, an' the plan works out." He took hold of the hand nearest him and pressed it tightly.

"Have you seen Hagar since?" he asked.

"No," she told him, looking quickly at him, for she caught an odd note in his voice. "I just couldn't bear to think of going back there."

"Well," he said, "Hagar's happy. I was over there this mornin'. Masten's there." He felt her hand grip his suddenly, and he smiled. He had talked with Catherson; the nester had told him the story, but it had been agreed between them the real story was not to be told. "They're married — Hagar an' Masten. Masten come to Catherson's shack the day after I — after I brought you home from there. An' they rode over to Lazette an' got hooked up. An' Catherson had been lookin' for Masten, figurin' to kill

him. I reckon it was planned for Masten to have a change of heart. Or mebbe it was gettin' married changed him. For he's a lot different, since. He's quiet, an' a heap considerate of other folks' feelin's. He's got some money, an' he's goin' to help Abe to fix up his place. He asked my pardon, for settin' Pickett an' Kelso on me. I shook his hand, Ruth, an' wished him luck an' happiness. Don't you wish him the same, Ruth — both of them?"

"Yes," she said earnestly; "I do!" And now she was looking at him with luminous eyes. "But it was very manly of you to forgive him so fully!"

"I reckon it wasn't so awful manly," he returned, blushing. "There wasn't nothin' else to do, I expect. Would you have me hold a grudge against him? An' spoil everything — nature's plan included? It was to happen that way, an' I ain't interferin'. Why, I reckon if I wasn't to forgive him, there'd be another plan spoiled — yours an' mine. An' I'm sure helpin' to work that out. I've thought of the first of the month," he said, looking at her, expectantly, and speaking lowly. "The justice of the peace will be back in Lazette then."

"So you've been inquiring?" she said, her face suffused with color.

"Why, sure! Somebody's got to do it. It's my job."

A little later they mounted their ponies and rode along the edge of the timber. When they reached the tree to which he had tied her pony on the night she had hurt her ankle, he called her attention to it.

"That's where I lost the bandanna," he told her. "It fell off my neck an' got tangled in the knot."

"Then you know!" she exclaimed.

"Sure," he said, grinning; "Uncle Jepson told me."

"I think Uncle Jep has been your right hand man all through this," she charged.

"Why shouldn't he be?" he retorted. And she could give him no reason why it should have been otherwise.

"It was a rather mean trick to play on me," she charged pretending indignation.

"If you'd have thought it mean, you'd have told me about it before now," he answered. "Patches was reliable."

"Kester an' Linton have sloped," he told her

as they rode away from the trees. "This climate was gettin' unhealthy for them."

"What makes folks act so foolish?" he questioned, later. "There ain't no way to escape what's got to be. Why can't folks take their medicine without makin' faces?"

She knew he referred to Masten, Chavis and Pickett, and she knew that this would be all the reference Randerson would ever make to them. But no answer formed in her mind and she kept silent.

When they came to the rock upon which he had found her, he halted and regarded it gravely.

"You had me scared that night," he said. "Patches had most run his head off. I was mighty relieved to see you."

"I treated you miserably that night," she confessed.

"Did you hear me complainin'?" he asked with a gentle smile at her. "I expect, some day, when we're together more, an' you get to lovin' me less than you do now, you'll get peevish ag'in. Married folks always do. But I won't notice it. I'll get on Patches—if he's alive, you wantin' to put off the marriage so long —"

THE RANGE BOSS

"Until the first!" she laughed, in gentle derision.

"Well," he said, with pretended gravity, "when a man has waited, as long as I've waited, he gets sort of impatient." He grinned again, and gave her this last shot: "An' mighty *patient* after!"

And they rode on again, through the white sunlight, close together, dreaming of days to come.

THE END

"FIREBRAND" TREVISON

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“Firebrand” Trevison

CHAPTER I

THE RIDER OF THE BLACK HORSE

THE trail from the Diamond K broke around the base of a low hill dotted thickly with scraggly oak and fir, then stretched away, straight and almost level (except for a deep cut where the railroad garg and a steam shovel were eating into a hundred-foot hill) to Manti. A month before, there had been no Manti, and six months before that there had been no railroad. The railroad and the town had followed in the wake of a party of khaki-clad men that had made reasonably fast progress through the country, leaving a trail of wooden stakes and little stone monuments behind. Previously, an agent of the railroad company had bartered through, securing a right-of-way. The fruit of the efforts of these men was a dark gash on a sun-scorched level, and two lines of steel laid as straight as skilled eye and transit could make them—and Manti.

Manti could not be overlooked, for the town obtruded upon the vision from where “Brand” Trevison was jogging along the Diamond K trail astride his big black horse, Nigger. Manti dominated the landscape,

not because it was big and imposing, but because it was new. Manti's buildings were scattered—there had been no need for crowding; but from a distance—from Trevison's distance, for instance, which was a matter of three miles or so—Manti looked insignificant, toy-like, in comparison with the vast world on whose bosom it sat. Manti seemed futile, ridiculous. But Trevison knew that the coming of the railroad marked an epoch, that the two thin, thread-like lines of steel were the tentacles of the man-made monster that had gripped the East—business reaching out for newer fields—and that Manti, futile and ridiculous as it seemed, was an outpost fortified by unlimited resource. Manti had come to stay.

And the cattle business was going, Trevison knew. The railroad company had built corrals at Manti, and Trevison knew they would be needed for several years to come. But he could foresee the day when they would be replaced by building and factory. Business was extending its lines, cattle must retreat before them. Several homesteaders had already appeared in the country, erecting fences around their claims. One of the homesteaders, when Trevison had come upon him a few days before, had impertinently inquired why Trevison did not fence the Diamond K range. Fence in five thousand acres! It had never been done in this section of the country. Trevison had permitted himself a cold grin, and had kept his answer to himself. The incident was not important, but it foreshadowed a day when a dozen like inquiries would make the building of a range fence imperative.

Trevison already felt the irritation of congestion—the presence of the homesteaders nettled him. He frowned as he rode. A year ago he would have sold out—cattle, land and buildings—at the market price. But at that time he had not known the value of his land. Now—

He kicked Nigger in the ribs and straightened in the saddle, grinning.

“She’s not for sale now—eh, Nig?”

Five minutes later he halted the black at the crest of the big railroad cut and looked over the edge appraisingly. Fifty laborers—directed by a mammoth personage in dirty blue overalls, boots, woolen shirt, and a wide-brimmed felt hat, and with a face undeniably Irish—were working frenziedly to keep pace with the huge steam shovel, whose iron jaws were biting into the earth with a regularity that must have been discouraging to its human rivals. A train of flat-cars, almost loaded, was on the track of the cut, and a dinky engine attached to them wheezed steam from a safety valve, the engineer and fireman lounging out of the cab window, lazily watching.

Patrick Carson, the personage—construction boss, good-natured, keen, observant—was leaning against a boulder at the side of the track, talking to the engineer at the instant Trevison appeared at the top of the cut. He glanced up, his eyes lighting.

“There’s thot mon, Trevison, ag’in, Murph’,” he said to the engineer. “Bedad, he’s a pitcher now, ain’t he?”

An imposing figure Trevison certainly was. Horse

and rider were outlined against the sky, and in the clear light every muscle and feature of man and beast stood out boldly and distinctly. The big black horse was a powerful brute, tall and rangy, with speed and courage showing plainly in contour, nostril and eye; and with head and ears erect he stood motionless, statuesque, heroic. His rider seemed to have been proportioned to fit the horse. Tall, slender of waist, broad of shoulder, straight, he sat loosely in the saddle looking at the scene below him, unconscious of the admiration he excited. Poetic fancies stirred Carson vaguely.

"Luk at 'im now, Murph; wid his big hat, his leather pants, his spurs, an' the rist av his contraptions! There's a divvil av a contrast here now, if ye'd only glimpse it. This civillyzation, ripraysinted be this railroad, don't seem to fit, nowadays. It's like it had butted into a pitcher book! Ain't he a darlin'?"

"I've never seen him up close," said Murphy. There was none of Carson's enthusiasm in his voice. "It's always seemed to me that a felluh who rigs himself out like that has got a lot of show-off stuff in him."

"The first time I clapped me eyes on wan av them cowbhoys I thought so, too," said Carson. "That was back on the other section. But I seen so manny av them rigged out like thot, thot I comminced to askin' questions. It's a domned purposeful rig, mon. The big felt hat is a daisy for keepin' off the sun, an' that gaudy bit av a rag around his neck keeps the sun and sand from blisterin' the skin. The leather pants is to keep his legs from gettin' clawed up be the thorns

av prickly pear an' what not, which he's got to ride through, an' the high heels is to keep his feet from slippin' through the stirrups. A kid c'ud tell ye what he carries the young cannon for, an' why he wears it so low on his hip. Ye've nivver seen him up close, eh Murph'? Well, I'm askin' him down so's ye can have a good look at him." He stepped back from the boulder and waved a hand at Trevison, shouting:

"Make it a real visit, bhoy!"

"I'll be pullin' out of here before he can get around," said Murphy, noting that the last car was almost filled.

Carson chuckled. "Hold tight," he warned; "he's comin'."

The side of the cut was steep, and the soft sand and clay did not make a secure footing. But when the black received the signal from Trevison he did not hesitate. Crouching like a great cat at the edge, he slid his forelegs over until his hoofs sank deep into the side of the cut. Then with a gentle lurch he drew his hind legs after him, and an instant later was gingerly descending, his rider leaning far back in the saddle, the reins held loosely in his hands.

It looked simple enough, the way the black was doing it, and Trevison's demeanor indicated perfect trust in the animal and in his own skill as a rider. But the laborers ceased working and watched, grouped, gesturing; the staccato coughing of the steam shovel died gaspingly, as the engineer shut off the engine and stood, rooted, his mouth agape; the fireman in the dinky engine held tightly to the cab window. Murphy muttered in astonishment, and Carson chuckled admiringly,

for the descent was a full hundred feet, and there were few men in the railroad gang that would have dared to risk the wall on foot.

The black had gained impetus with distance. A third of the slope had been covered when he struck some loose earth that shifted with his weight and carried his hind quarters to one side and off balance. Instantly the rider swung his body toward the wall of the cut, twisted in the saddle and swung the black squarely around, the animal scrambling like a cat. The black stood, braced, facing the crest of the cut, while the dislodged earth, preceded by pebbles and small boulders, clattered down behind him. Then, under the urge of Trevison's gentle hand and voice, the black wheeled again and faced the descent.

"I wouldn't ride a horse down there for the damned railroad!" declared Murphy.

"Thru' for ye — ye c'udn't," grinned Carson.

"A man could ride anywhere with a horse like that!" remarked the fireman, fascinated.

"Ye'd have brought a cropper in that slide, an' the road wud be minus a coal-heaver!" said Carson. "Wud ye luk at him now!"

The black was coming down, forelegs asprawl, his hind quarters sliding in the sand. Twice as his forehoofs struck some slight obstruction his hind quarters lifted and he stood, balanced, on his forelegs, and each time Trevison averted the impending catastrophe by throwing himself far back in the saddle and slapping the black's hips sharply.

"He's a circus rider!" shouted Carson, gleefully.

"He's got the coolest head of anny mon I iver seen! He's a divvil, thot mon!"

The descent was spectacular, but it was apparent that Trevison cared little for its effect upon his audience, for as he struck the level and came riding toward Carson and the others, there was no sign of self-consciousness in his face or manner. He smiled faintly, though, as a cheer from the laborers reached his ears. In the next instant he had halted Nigger near the dinky engine, and Carson was introducing him to the engineer and fireman.

Looking at Trevison "close up," Murphy was constrained to mentally label him "some man," and he regretted his deprecatory words of a few minutes before. Plainly, there was no "show-off stuff" in Trevison. His feat of riding down the wall of the cut had not been performed to impress anyone; the look of reckless abandon in the otherwise serene eyes that held Murphy's steadily, convinced the engineer that the man had merely responded to a dare-devil impulse. There was something in Trevison's appearance that suggested an entire disregard of fear. The engineer had watched the face of a brother of his craft one night when the latter had been driving a roaring monster down a grade at record-breaking speed into a wall of rain-soaked darkness out of which might thunder at any instant another roaring monster, coming in the opposite direction. There had been a mistake in orders, and the train was running against time to make a switch. Several times during the ride Murphy had caught a glimpse of the engineer's face, and the eyes

had haunted him since—defiance of death, contempt of consequences, had been reflected in them. Trevison's eyes reminded him of the engineer's. But in Trevison's eyes was an added expression—cold humor. The engineer of Murphy's recollection would have met death dauntlessly. Trevison would meet it no less dauntlessly, but would mock at it. Murphy looked long and admiringly at him, noting the deep chest, the heavy muscles, the blue-black sheen of his freshly-shaven chin and jaw under the tan; the firm, mobile mouth, the aggressive set to his head. Murphy set his age down at twenty-seven or twenty-eight. Murphy was sixty himself—the age that appreciates, and secretly envies, the virility of youth. Carson was complimenting Trevison on his descent of the wall of the cut.

"You're a daisy rider, me bhoy!"

"Nigger's a clever horse," smiled Trevison. Murphy was pleased that he was giving the animal the credit. "Nigger's well trained. He's wiser than some men. Tricky, too." He patted the sleek, muscular neck of the beast and the animal whinnied gently. "He's careful of his master, though," laughed Trevison. "A man pulled a gun on me, right after I'd got Nigger. He had the drop, and he meant business. I had to shoot. To disconcert the fellow, I had to jump Nigger against him. Since then, whenever Nigger sees a gun in anyone's hand, he thinks it's time to bowl that man over. There's no holding him. He won't even stand for anyone pulling a handkerchief out of a hip pocket when I'm on him." Trevison grinned. "Try

it, Carson, but get that boulder between you and Nigger before you do."

"I don't like the look av the baste's eye," declined the Irishman. "I wudn't doubt ye're worrud for the wurrold. But he wudn't jump a mon divvil a bit quicker than his master, or I'm a sinner!"

Trevison's eyes twinkled. "You're a good construction boss, Carson. But I'm glad to see that you're getting more considerate."

"Av what?"

"Of your men." Trevison glanced back; he had looked once before, out of the tail of his eye. The laborers were idling in the cut, enjoying the brief rest, taking advantage of Carson's momentary dereliction, for the last car had been filled.

"I'll be rayported yet, begob!"

Carson waved his hands, and the laborers dove for the flat-cars. When the last man was aboard, the engine coughed and moved slowly away. Carson climbed into the engine-cab, with a shout: "So-long bhoy!" to Trevison. The latter held Nigger with a firm rein, for the animal was dancing at the noise made by the engine, and as the cars filed past him, running faster now, the laborers grinned at him and respectfully raised their hats. For they had come from one of the Latin countries of Europe, and for them, in the person of this heroic figure of a man who had ridden his horse down the steep wall of the cut, was romance.

CHAPTER II

IN WHICH HATRED IS BORN

FOR some persons romance dwells in the new and the unusual, and for other persons it dwells not at all. Certain of Rosalind Benham's friends would have been able to see nothing but the crudities and squalor of Manti, viewing it as Miss Benham did, from one of the windows of her father's private car, which early that morning had been shunted upon a switch at the outskirts of town. Those friends would have seen nothing but a new town of weird and picturesque buildings, with more saloons than seemed to be needed in view of the noticeable lack of citizens. They would have shuddered at the dust-windrowed street, the litter of refuse, the dismal lonesomeness, the forlornness, the utter isolation, the desolation. Those friends would have failed to note the vast, silent reaches of green-brown plain that stretched and yawned into aching distances; the wonderfully blue and cloudless sky that covered it; they would have overlooked the timber groves that spread here and there over the face of the land, with their lure of mystery. No thoughts of the bigness of this country would have crept in upon them—except as they might have been reminded of the dreary distance from the glitter and

the tinsel of the East. The mountains, distant and shining, would have meant nothing to them; the strong, pungent aroma of the sage might have nauseated them.

But Miss Benham had caught her first glimpse of Manti and the surrounding country from a window of her berth in the car that morning just at dawn, and she loved it. She had lain for some time cuddled up in her bed, watching the sun rise over the distant mountains, and the breath of the sage, sweeping into the half-opened window, had carried with it something stronger—the lure of a virgin country.

Aunt Agatha Benham, chaperon, forty—maiden lady from choice—various uncharitable persons hinted humorously of pursued eligibles—found Rosalind gazing ecstatically out of the berth window when she stirred and awoke shortly after nine. Agatha climbed out of her berth and sat on its edge, yawning sleepily.

“This is Manti, I suppose,” she said acridly, shoving the curtain aside and looking out of the window. “We should consider ourselves fortunate not to have had an adventure with Indians or outlaws. We have *that* to be thankful for, at least.”

Agatha’s sarcasm failed to penetrate the armor of Rosalind’s unconcern—as Agatha’s sarcasms always did. Agatha occupied a place in Rosalind’s affections, but not in her scheme of enjoyment. Since she *must* be chaperoned, Agatha was acceptable to her. But that did not mean that she made a confidante of Agatha. For Agatha was looking at the world through the eyes of Forty, and the vision of Twenty is somewhat more romantic.

"Whatever your father thought of in permitting you to come out here is a mystery to me," pursued Agatha severely, as she fussed with her hair. "It was like him, though, to go to all this trouble—for me—merely to satisfy your curiosity about the country. I presume we shall be returning shortly."

"Don't be impatient, Aunty," said the girl, still gazing out of the window. "I intend to stretch my legs before I return."

"Mercy!" gasped Agatha; "such language! This barbaric country has affected you already, my dear. Legs!" She summoned horror into her expression, but it was lost on Rosalind, who still gazed out of the window. Indeed, from a certain light in the girl's eyes it might be adduced that she took some delight in shocking Agatha.

"I shall stay here quite some time, I think," said Rosalind. "Daddy said there was no hurry; that he might come out here in a month, himself. And I have been dying to get away from the petty conventionalities of the East. I am going to be absolutely human for a while, Aunty. I am going to 'rough it'—that is, as much as one can rough it when one is domiciled in a private car. I am going to get a horse and have a look at the country. And Aunty—" here the girl's voice came chokingly, as though some deep emotion agitated her—"—I am going to ride 'straddle'!"

She did not look to see whether Agatha had survived this second shock—but Agatha had survived many such shocks. It was only when, after a silence of several minutes, Agatha spoke again, that the gir!

seemed to remember there was anybody in the compartment with her. Agatha's voice was laden with contempt:

"Well, I don't know what you see in this outlandish place to compensate for what you miss at home."

The girl did not look around. "A man on a black horse, Auntie," she said. "He has passed here twice. I have never seen such a horse. I don't remember to have ever seen a man quite like the rider. He looks positively—er—*heroish*! He is built like a Roman gladiator, he rides the black horse as though he had been sculptured on it, and his head has a set that makes one feel he has a mind of his own. He has furnished me with the only thrill that I have felt since we left New York!"

"He hasn't seen *you*!" said Agatha, coldly; "of course you made suré of *that*?"

The girl looked mischievously at the older woman. She ran her fingers through her hair—brown and vigorous-looking—then shaded her eyes with her hands and gazed at her reflection in a mirror near by. In *deshabille* she looked fresh and bewitching. She had looked like a radiant goddess to "Brand" Trevison, when he had accidentally caught a glimpse of her face at the window while she had been watching him. He had not known that the lady had just awakened from her beauty sleep. He would have sworn that she needed no beauty sleep. And he had deliberately ridden past the car again, hoping to get another glimpse of her. The girl smiled.

"I am not so positive about that, Auntie. Let us

not be prudish. If he saw me, he made no sign, and therefore he is a gentleman." She looked out of the window and smiled again. "There he is now, Aunty!"

It was Agatha who parted the curtains, this time. The horseman's face was toward the window, and he saw her. An expression of puzzled astonishment glowed in his eyes, superseded quickly by disappointment, whereat Rosalind giggled softly and hid her tousled head in a pillow.

"The impertinent brute! Rosalind, he dared to look directly at me, and I am sure he would have winked at me in another instant! A gentleman!" she said, coldly.

"Don't be severe, Aunty. I'm sure he is a gentleman, for all his curiosity. See—there he is, riding away without so much as looking back!"

Half an hour later the two women entered the dining-room just as a big, rather heavy-featured, but handsome man, came through the opposite door. He greeted both ladies effusively, and smilingly looked at his watch.

"You over-slept' this morning, ladies—don't you think? It's after ten. I've been rummaging around town, getting acquainted. It's rather an unfinished place, after the East. But in time—" He made a gesture, perhaps a silent prophecy that one day Manti would out-strip New York, and bowed the ladies to seats at table, talking while the colored waiter moved obsequiously about them.

"I thought at first that your father was over-enthusiastic about Manti, Miss Benham," he continued.

"But the more I see of it the firmer becomes my conviction that your father was right. There are tremendous possibilities for growth. Even now it is a rather fertile country. We shall make it hum, once the railroad and the dam are completed. It is a logical site for a town—there is no other within a hundred miles in any direction."

"And you are to anticipate the town's growth— isn't that it, Mr. Corrigan?"

"You put it very comprehensively, Miss Benham; but perhaps it would be better to say that I am the advance agent of prosperity—that sounds rather less mercenary. We must not allow the impression to get abroad that mere money is to be the motive power behind our efforts."

"But money-making is the real motive, after all?" said Miss Benham, dryly.

"I submit there are several driving forces in life, and that money-making is not the least compelling of them."

"The other forces?" It seemed to Corrigan that Miss Benham's face was very serious. But Agatha, who knew Rosalind better than Corrigan knew her, was aware that the girl was merely demurely sarcastic.

"Love and hatred are next," he said, slowly.

"You would place money-making before love?" Rosalind bantered.

"Money adds the proper flavor to love," laughed Corrigan. The laugh was laden with subtle significance and he looked straight at the girl, a deep fire slumbering in his eyes. "Yes," he said slowly,

"money-making is a great passion. I have it. But I can hate, and love. And when I do either, it will be strongly. And then—"

Agatha cleared her throat impatiently. Corrigan colored slightly, and Miss Benham smothered something, artfully directing the conversation into less personal channels:

"You are going to build manufactories, organize banks, build municipal power-houses, speculate in real estate, and such things, I suppose?"

"And build a dam. We already have a bank here, Miss Benham."

"Will father be interested in those things?"

"Silently. You understand, that being president of the railroad, your father must keep in the background. The actual promoting of these enterprises will be done by me."

Miss Benham looked dreamily out of the window. Then she turned to Corrigan and gazed at him meditatively, though the expression in her eyes was so obviously impersonal that it chilled any amorous emotion that Corrigan might have felt.

"I suppose you are right," she said. "It must be thrilling to feel a conscious power over the destiny of a community, to direct its progress, to manage it, and—er—figuratively to grab industries by their—" She looked slyly at Agatha "—lower extremities and shake the dollars out of them. Yes," she added, with a wistful glance through the window; "that must be more exciting than being merely in love."

Agatha again followed Rosalind's gaze and saw the

black horse standing in front of a store. She frowned, and observed stiffly:

"It seems to me that the people in these small places—such as Manti—are not capable of managing the large enterprises that Mr. Corrigan speaks of." She looked at Rosalind, and the girl knew that she was deprecating the rider of the black horse. Rosalind smiled sweetly.

"Oh, I am sure there must be *some* intelligent persons among them!"

"As a rule," stated Corrigan, dogmatically, "the first citizens of any town are an uncouth and worthless set."

"The Four Hundred would take exception to that!" laughed Rosalind.

Corrigan laughed with her. "You know what I mean, of course. Take Manti, for instance. Or any new western town. The lowest elements of society are represented—most of the people are very ignorant and criminal."

The girl looked sharply at Corrigan, though he was not aware of the glance. Was there a secret understanding between Corrigan and Agatha? Had Corrigan also some knowledge of the rider's pilgrimages past the car window? Both had maligned the rider. But the girl had seen intelligence on the face of the rider, and something in the set of his head had told her that he was not a criminal. And despite his picturesque rigging, and the atmosphere of the great waste places that seemed to envelop him, he had made a deeper impression on her than had Corrigan, darkly

handsome, well-groomed, a polished product of polite convention and breeding, whom her father wanted her to marry.

"Well," she said, looking at the black horse; "I intend to observe Manti's citizens more closely before attempting to express an opinion."

Half an hour later, in response to Corrigan's invitation, Rosalind was walking down Manti's one street, Corrigan beside her. Corrigan had donned khaki clothing, a broad, felt hat, boots, neckerchief. But in spite of the change of garments there was a poise, an atmosphere about him, that hinted strongly of the graces of civilization. Rosalind felt a flash of pride in him. He was big, masterful, fascinating.

Manti seemed to be fraudulent, farcical, upon closer inspection. For one thing, its crudeness was more glaring, and its unpainted board fronts looked flimsy, transient. Compared to the substantial buildings of the East, Manti's structures were hovels. Here was the primitive town in the first flush of its creation. Miss Benham did not laugh, for a mental picture rose before her—a bit of wild New England coast, a lowering sky, a group of Old-world pilgrims shivering around a blazing fire in the open, a ship in the offing. That also was a band of first citizens; that picture and the one made by Manti typified the spirit of America.

There were perhaps twenty buildings. Corrigan took her into several of them. But, she noted, he did not take her into the store in front of which was the black horse. She was introduced to several of the proprietors. Twice she overheard parts of the conversation

carried on between Corrigan and the proprietors. In each case the conversation was the same:

"Do you own this property?"

"The building."

"Who owns the land?"

"A company in New York."

Corrigan introduced himself as the manager of the company, and spoke of erecting an office. The two men spoke about their "leases." The latter seemed to have been limited to two months.

"See me before your lease expires," she heard Corrigan tell the men.

"Does the railroad own the town site?" asked Rosalind as they emerged from the last store.

"Yes. And leases are going to be more valuable presently."

"You don't mean that you are going to extort money from them—after they have gone to the expense of erecting buildings?"

His smile was pleasant. "They will be treated with the utmost consideration, Miss Benham."

He ushered her into the bank. Like the other buildings, the bank was of frame construction. Its only resemblance to a bank was in the huge safe that stood in the rear of the room, and a heavy wire netting behind which ran a counter. Some chairs and a desk were behind the counter, and at the desk sat a man of probably forty, who got up at the entrance of his visitors and approached them, grinning and holding out a hand to Corrigan.

"So you're here at last, Jeff," he said. "I saw

the car on the switch this morning. The show will open pretty soon now, eh?" He looked inquiringly at Rosalind, and Corrigan presented her. She heard the man's name, "Mr. Crofton Braman," softly spoken by her escort, and she acknowledged the introduction formally and walked to the door, where she stood looking out into the street.

Braman repelled her—she did not know why. A certain crafty gleam of his eyes, perhaps, strangely blended with a bold intentness as he had looked at her; a too effusive manner; a smoothly ingratiating smile—these evidences of character somehow made her link him with schemes and plots.

She did not reflect long over Braman. Across the street she saw the rider of the black horse standing beside the animal at a hitching rail in front of the store that Corrigan had passed without entering. Viewed from this distance, the rider's face was more distinct, and she saw that he was good-looking—quite as good-looking as Corrigan, though of a different type. Standing, he did not seem to be so tall as Corrigan, nor was he quite so bulky. But he was lithe and powerful, and in his movements, as he unhitched the black horse, threw the reins over its head and patted its neck, was an ease and grace that made Rosalind's eyes sparkle with admiration.

The rider seemed to be in no hurry to mount his horse. The girl was certain that twice as he patted the animal's neck he stole glances at her, and a stain appeared in her cheeks, for she remembered the car window.

And then she heard a voice greet the rider. A man came out of the door of one of the saloons, glanced at the rider and raised his voice, joyously:

"Well, if it ain't ol' 'Brand'! Where in hell you been keepin' yourself? I ain't seen you for a week!"

Friendship was speaking here, and the girl's heart leaped in sympathy. She watched with a smile as the other man reached the rider's side and wrung his hand warmly. Such effusiveness would have been thought hypocritical in the East; humanness was always frowned upon. But what pleased the girl most was this evidence that the rider was well liked. Additional evidence on this point collected quickly. It came from several doors, in the shapes of other men who had heard the first man's shout, and presently the rider was surrounded by many friends.

The girl was deeply interested. She forgot Braman, Corrigan—forgot that she was standing in the doorway of the bank. She was seeing humanity stripped of conventionalities; these people were not governed by the intimidating regard for public opinion that so effectively stifled warm impulses among the persons she knew.

She heard another man call to him, and she found herself saying: "'Brand'! What an odd name!" But it seemed to fit him; he was of a type that one sees rarely—clean, big, athletic, virile, magnetic. His personality dominated the group; upon him interest centered heavily. Nor did his popularity appear to destroy his poise or make him self-conscious. The girl watched closely for signs of that. Had he shown the slightest

trace of self-worship she would have lost interest in him. He appeared to be a trifle embarrassed, and that made him doubly attractive to her. He bantered gayly with the men, and several times his replies to some quip convulsed the others.

And then while she dreamily watched him, she heard several voices insist that he "show Nigger off." He demurred, and when they again insisted, he spoke lowly to them, and she felt their concentrated gaze upon her. She knew that he had declined to "show Nigger off" because of her presence. "Nigger," she guessed, was his horse. She secretly hoped he would overcome his prejudice, for she loved the big black, and was certain that any performance he participated in would be well worth seeing. So, in order to influence the rider she turned her back, pretending not to be interested. But when she heard exclamations of satisfaction from the group of men she wheeled again, to see that the rider had mounted and was sitting in the saddle, grinning at a man who had produced a harmonica and was rubbing it on a sleeve of his shirt, preparatory to placing it to his lips.

The rider had gone too far now to back out, and Rosalind watched him in frank curiosity. And in the next instant, when the strains of the harmonica smote the still morning air, Nigger began to prance.

What followed reminded the girl of a scene in the ring of a circus. The horse, proud, dignified, began to pace slowly to the time of the accompanying music, executing difficult steps that must have tried the patience of both animal and trainer during the teaching period;

the rider, lithe, alert, proud also, smiling his pleasure.

Rosalind stood there long, watching. It was a clever exhibition, and she found herself wondering about the rider. Had he always lived in the West?

The animal performed a dozen feats of the circus arena, and the girl was so deeply interested in him that she did not observe Corrigan when he emerged from the bank, stepped down into the street and stood watching the rider. She noticed him though, when the black, forced to her side of the street through the necessity of executing a turn, passed close to the easterner. And then, with something of a shock, she saw Corrigan smiling derisively. At the sound of applause from the group on the opposite side of the street, Corrigan's derision became a sneer. Miss Benham felt resentment; a slight color stained her cheeks. For she could not understand why Corrigan should show displeasure over this clean and clever amusement. She was looking full at Corrigan when he turned and caught her gaze. The light in his eyes was positively venomous.

"It is a rather dramatic bid for your interest, isn't it, Miss Benham?" he said.

His voice came during a lull that followed the applause. It reached Rosalind, full and resonant. It carried to the rider of the black horse, and glancing side-long at him, Rosalind saw his face whiten under the deep tan upon it. It carried, too, to the other side of the street, and the girl saw faces grow suddenly tense; noted the stiffening of bodies. The flat, ominous silence that followed was unreal and oppressive. Out of it came the rider's voice as he urged the black to a

point within three or four paces of Corrigan and sat in the saddle, looking at him. And now for the first time Rosalind had a clear, full view of the rider's face and a quiver of trepidation ran over her. For the lean jaws were corded, the mouth was firm and set—she knew his teeth were clenched; it was the face of a man who would not be trifled with. His chin was shoved forward slightly; somehow it helped to express the cold humor that shone in his narrowed, steady eyes. His voice, when he spoke to Corrigan, had a metallic quality that rang ominously in the silence that had continued:

"Back up your play or take it back," he said slowly.

Corrigan had not changed his position. He stared fixedly at the rider; his only sign of emotion over the latter's words was a quickening of the eyes. He idly tapped with his fingers on the sleeve of his khaki shirt, where the arm passed under them to fold over the other. His voice easily matched the rider's in its quality of quietness:

"My conversation was private. You are interfering without cause."

Watching the rider, filled with a sudden, breathless premonition of impending tragedy, Rosalind saw his eyes glitter with the imminence of physical action. Distressed, stirred by an impulse to avert what threatened, she took a step forward, speaking rapidly to Corrigan:

"Mr. Corrigan, this is positively silly! You know you were hardly discreet!"

Corrigan smiled coldly, and the girl knew that it was not a question of right or wrong between the two

men, but a conflict of spirit. She did not know that hatred had been born here; that instinctively each knew the other for a foe, and that this present clash was to be merely one battle of the war that would be waged between them if both survived.

Not for an instant did Corrigan's eyes wander from those of the rider. He saw from them that he might expect no further words. None came. The rider's right hand fell to the butt of the pistol that swung low on his right hip. Simultaneously, Corrigan's hand dropped to his hip pocket.

Rosalind saw the black horse lunge forward as though propelled by a sudden spring. A dust cloud rose from his hoofs, and Corrigan was lost in it. When the dust swirled away, Corrigan was disclosed to the girl's view, doubled queerly on the ground, face down. The black horse had struck him with its shoulder—he seemed to be badly hurt.

For a moment the girl stood, swaying, looking around appealingly, startled wonder, dismay and horror in her eyes. It had happened so quickly that she was stunned. She had but one conscious emotion—thankfulness that neither man had used his pistol.

No one moved. The girl thought some of them might have come to Corrigan's assistance. She did not know that the ethics forbade interference, that a fight was between the fighters until one acknowledged defeat.

Corrigan's face was in the dust; he had not moved. The black horse stood, quietly now, several feet distant, and presently the rider dismounted, walked to Corrigan

and turned him over. He worked the fallen man's arms and legs, and moved his neck, then knelt and listened at his chest. He got up and smiled mirthlessly at the girl.

"He's just knocked out, Miss Benham. It's nothing serious. Nigger—"

"You coward!" she interrupted, her voice thick with passion.

His lips whitened, but he smiled faintly.

"Nigger—" he began again.

"Coward! Coward!" she repeated, standing rigid before him, her hands clenched, her lips stiff with scorn.

He smiled resignedly and turned away. She stood watching him, hating him, hurling mental anathemas after him, until she saw him pass through the doorway of the bank. Then she turned to see Corrigan just getting up.

Not a man in the group across the street had moved. They, too, had watched Trevison go into the bank, and now their glances shifted to the girl and Corrigan. Their sympathies, she saw plainly, were with Trevison: several of them smiled as the easterner got to his feet.

Corrigan was pale and breathless, but he smiled at her and held her off when she essayed to help him brush the dust from his clothing. He did that himself, and mopped his face with a handkerchief.

"It wasn't fair," whispered the girl, sympathetically. "I almost wish that you had killed him!" she added, vindictively.

"My, what a fire-eater!" he said with a broad smile. She thought he looked handsomer with the dust upon

him, than he had ever seemed when polished and immaculate.

"Are you badly hurt?" she asked, with a concern that made him look quickly at her.

He laughed and patted her arm lightly. "Not a bit hurt," he said. "Come, those men are staring."

He escorted her to the step of the private car, and lingered a moment there to make his apology for his part in the trouble. He told her frankly, that he was to blame, knowing that Trevison's action in riding him down would more than outweigh any resentment she might feel over his mistake in bringing about the clash in her presence.

She graciously forgave him, and a little later she entered the car alone; he telling her that he would be in presently, after he returned from the station where he intended to send a telegram. She gave him a smile, standing on the platform of the car, dazzling, eloquent with promise. It made his heart leap with exultation, and as he went his way toward the station he voiced a sentiment:

"Entirely worth being ridden down for."

But his jaws set savagely as he approached the station. He did not go into the station, but around the outside wall of it, passing between it and another building and coming at last to the front of the bank building. He had noted that the black horse was still standing in front of the bank building, and that the group of men had dispersed. The street was deserted.

Corrigan's movements became quick and sinister. He drew a heavy revolver out of a hip pocket, shoved

its butt partly up his sleeve and concealed the cylinder and barrel in the palm of his hand. Then he stepped into the door of the bank. He saw Trevison standing at one of the grated windows of the wire netting, talking with Braman. Corrigan had taken several steps into the room before Trevison heard him, and then Trevison turned, to find himself looking into the gaping muzzle of Corrigan's pistol.

"You didn't run," said the latter. "Thought it was all over, I suppose. Well, it isn't." He was grinning coldly, and was now deliberate and unexcited, though two crimson spots glowed in his cheeks, betraying the presence of passion.

"Don't reach for that gun!" he warned Trevison. "I'll blow a hole through you if you wriggle a finger!" Watching Trevison, he spoke to Braman: "You got a back room here?"

The banker stepped around the end of the counter and opened a door behind the wire netting. "Right here," he directed.

Corrigan indicated the door with a jerking movement of the head. "Move!" he said shortly, to Trevison. The latter's lips parted in a cold, amused grin, and he hesitated slightly, yielding presently.

An instant later the three were standing in the middle of a large room, empty except for a cot upon which Braman slept, some clothing hanging on the walls, a bench and a chair. Corrigan ordered the banker to clear the room. When that had been done, Corrigan spoke again to the banker:

"Get his gun."

A snapping alertness of the eyes indicated that Trevison knew what was coming. That was the reason he had been so quiescent this far; it was why he made no objection when Braman passed his hands over his clothing in search of other weapons, after his pistol had been lifted from its holster by the banker.

"Now get out of here and lock the doors!" ordered Corrigan. "And let nobody come in!"

Braman retired, grinning expectantly.

Then Corrigan backed away until he came to the wall. Reaching far up, he hung his revolver on a nail.

"Now," he said to Trevison, his voice throaty from passion; "take off your damned foolish trappings. I'm going to knock hell out of you!"

CHAPTER III

BEATING A GOOD MAN

TREVISION had not moved. He had watched the movements of the other closely, noting his huge bulk, his lithe motions, the play of his muscles as he backed across the room to dispose of the pistol. At Corrigan's words though, Trevison's eyes glowed with a sudden fire, his teeth gleamed, his straight lips parting in a derisive smile. The other's manner toward him had twanged the chord of animosity that had been between them since the first exchange of glances, and he was as eager as Corrigan for the clash that must now come. He had known that the first conflict had been an unfinished thing. He laughed in sheer delight, though that delight was tempered with savage determination.

"Save your boasts," he taunted.

Corrigan sneered. "You won't look so damned attractive when you leave this room." He took off his hat and tossed it into a corner, then turned to Trevison with an ugly grin.

"Ready?" he said.

"Quite." Trevison had not accepted Corrigan's suggestion about taking off his "damned foolish trappings," and he still wore them — cartridge belt, leather

chaps, spurs. But now he followed Corrigan's lead and threw his hat from him. Then he crouched and faced Corrigan.

They circled cautiously, Trevison's spurs jingling musically. Then Trevison went in swiftly, jabbing with his left, throwing off Corrigan's vicious counter with the elbow, and ripping his right upward. The fist met Corrigan's arm as the latter blocked, and the shock forced both men back a step. Corrigan grinned with malicious interest and crowded forward.

"That's good," he said; "you're not a novice. I hope you're not a quitter. I've quite a bit to hand you for riding me down."

Trevison grinned derisively, but made no answer. He knew he must save his wind for this man. Corrigan was strong, clever; his forearm, which had blocked Trevison's uppercut, had seemed like a bar of steel.

Trevison went in again with the grim purpose of discovering just how strong his antagonist was. Corrigan evaded a stiff left jab intended for his chin, and his own right cross missed as Trevison ducked into a clinch. With arms locked they strained, legs braced, their lungs heaving as they wrestled, doggedly.

Corrigan stood like a post, not giving an inch. Vainly Trevison writhed, seeking a position which would betray a weakened muscle, but though he exerted every ounce of his own mighty strength Corrigan held him even. They broke at last, mutually, and Corrigan must have felt the leathery quality of Trevison's muscles, for his face was set in serious lines. His eyes glittered malignantly as he caught a confident smile

on Trevison's lips, and he bored in silently, swinging both hands.

Trevison had been the cool boxer, carefully trying out his opponent. He had felt little emotion save that of self-protection. At the beginning of the fight he would have apologized to Corrigan—with reservations. Now he was stirred with the lust of battle. Corrigan's malignance had struck a responsive passion in him, and the sodden impact of fist on flesh, the matching of strength against strength, the strain of iron muscles, the contact of their bodies, the sting and burn of blows, had aroused the latent savage in him. He was still cool, however, but it was the crafty coolness of the trained fighter, and as Corrigan crowded him he whipped in ripping blows that sent the big man's head back. Corrigan paid little heed to the blows; he shook them off, grunting. Blood was trickling thinly from his lips; he spat bestially over Trevison's shoulder in a clinch, and tried to sweep the latter from his feet.

The agility of the cow-puncher saved him, and he went dancing out of harm's way, his spurs jingling. Corrigan was after him with a rush. A heavy blow caught Trevison on the right side of the neck just below the ear and sent him, tottering, against the wall of the building, from which he rebounded like a rubber ball. smothering Corrigan with an avalanche of deadening straight-arm punches that brought a glassy stare into Corrigan's eyes. The big man's head wobbled, and Trevison crowded in, intent on ending the fight quickly, but Corrigan covered instinctively, and when Trevison

in his eagerness missed a blow, the big man clinched with him and hung on doggedly until his befogged brain could clear. For a few minutes they rocked around the room, their heels thudding on the bare boards of the floor, creating sounds that filtered through the enclosing walls and smote the silence of the outside world with resonant rumblings. Mercilessly, Trevison hammered at the heavy head that sought a haven on his shoulder. Corrigan had been stunned and wanted no more long range work. He tried to lock his big arms around the other's waist in an attempt to wrestle, realizing that in that sort of a contest lay his only hope of victory, but Trevison, agile, alert to his danger, slipped elusively from the grasping hands and thudded uppercuts to the other's mouth and jaws that landed with sickening force. But none of the blows landed on a vital spot, and Corrigan hung grimly on.

At last, lashing viciously, wriggling, squirming, swinging around in a wide circle to get out of Corrigan's clutches, Trevison broke the clinch and stood off, breathing heavily, summoning his reserve strength for a finishing blow. Corrigan had been fearfully punished during the last few minutes, but he was gradually recovering from his dizziness, and he grinned hideously at Trevison through his smashed lips. He surged forward, reminding Trevison of a wounded bear, but Trevison retreated warily as he measured the distance from which he would drive the blow that would end it.

He was still retreating, describing a wide circle. He swung around toward the door through which Braman

had gone—his back was toward it. He did not see the door open slightly as he passed; he had not seen Braman's face in the slight crevice that had been between door and jamb all along. Nor did he see the banker jab at his legs with the handle of a broom. But he felt the handle hit his legs. It tripped him, forcing him to lose his balance. As he fell he saw Corrigan's eyes brighten, and he twisted sideways to escape a heavy blow that Corrigan aimed at him. He only partially evaded it—it struck him glancingly, a little to the left of the chin, stunning him, and he fell awkwardly, his left arm doubling under him. The agonizing pain that shot through the arm as he crumpled to the floor told him that it had been broken at the wrist. A queer stupor came upon him, during which he neither felt nor saw. Dimly, he sensed that Corrigan was striking at him; with a sort of vague half-consciousness he felt that the blows were landing. But they did not hurt, and he laughed at Corrigan's futile efforts. The only feeling he had was a blind rage against Braman, for he was certain that it had been the banker who had tripped him. Then he saw the broom on the floor and the crevice in the doorway.

He got to his feet some way, Corrigan hanging to him, raining blows upon him, and he laughed aloud as, his vision clearing a little, he saw Corrigan's mouth, weak, open, drooling blood, and remembered that when Braman had tripped him Corrigan had hardly been in shape to do much effective hitting. He tottered away from Corrigan, taunting him, though afterwards he could not remember what his words were. Also, he

heard Corrigan cursing him, though he could never remember *his* words, either. He tried to swing his left arm as Corrigan came within range of it, but found he could not lift it, and so ducked the savage blow that Corrigan aimed at him and slipped sideways, bringing his right into play. Several times as they circled he uppercut Corrigan with the right, he retreating, side-stepping; Corrigan following him doggedly, slashing venomously at him, hitting him occasionally. Corrigan could not hurt him, and he could not resist laughing at Corrigan's face—it was so hideously repulsive.

A man came out of the front door of Hanrahan's saloon across the street from the bank building, and stood in the street for a moment, looking about him. Had Miss Benham seen the man she would have recognized him as the one who had previously come out of the saloon to greet the rider with: "Well, if it ain't ol' 'Brand'!" He saw the black horse standing in front of the bank building, but Trevison was nowhere in sight. The man mumbled: "I don't want him to git away without me seein' him," and crossed the street to the bank window and peered inside. He saw Braman peering through a half-open door at the rear of the banking room, and he heard sounds—queer, jarring sounds that made the glass window in front of him rattle and quiver.

He dove around to the side of the building and looked in a window. He stood for a moment, watching with bulging eyes, half drew a pistol, thought better

of the notion and replaced it, and then darted back to the saloon from which he had emerged, croaking hoarsely: "Fight! fight!"

Trevison had not had the agility to evade one of Corrigan's heavy blows. It had caught him as he had tried to duck, striking fairly on the point of the jaw, and he was badly dazed. But he still grinned mockingly at his enemy as the latter followed him, tensed, eager, snarling. He evaded other blows that would have finished him—through instinct, it seemed to Corrigan; and though there was little strength left in him he kept working his right fist through Corrigan's guard and into his face, pecking away at it until it seemed to be cut to ribbons.

Voices came from somewhere in the banking room, voices raised in altercation. Neither of the two men, raging around the rear room, heard them—they had become insensate savages oblivious of their surroundings, drunken with passion, with the blood-mania gripping their brains.

Trevison had brought the last ounce of his remaining strength into play and had landed a crushing blow on Corrigan's chin. The big man was wobbling crazily about in the general direction of Trevison, swinging his arms wildly, Trevison evading him, snapping home blows that landed smackingly without doing much damage. They served merely to keep Corrigan in the semi-comatose state in which Trevison's last hard blow had left him. And that last blow had sapped Trevison's strength; his spirit alone had survived the drunken

orgy of rage and hatred. As the tumult around him increased—the tramp of many feet, scuffling; harsh, discordant voices, curses, yells of protest, threats—not a sound of which he heard, so intent was he with his work of battering his adversary, he ceased to retreat from Corrigan, and as the latter shuffled toward him he stiffened and drove his right fist into the big man's face. Corrigan cursed and grunted, but lunged forward again. They swung at the same instant—Trevison's right just grazing Corrigan's jaw; Corrigan's blow, full and sweeping, thudding against Trevison's left ear. Trevison's head rolled, his chin sagged to his chest, and his knees doubled like hinges. Corrigan smirked malevolently and drove forward again. But he was too eager, and his blows missed the reeling target that, with arms hanging wearily at his sides, still instinctively kept to his feet, the taunting smile, now becoming bitterly contemptuous, still on his face. It meant that though exhausted, his arm broken, he felt only scorn for Corrigan's prowess as a fighter.

Fighting off the weariness he lunged forward again, swinging the now deadened right arm at the blur Corrigan made in front of him. Something collided with him—a human form—and thinking it was Corrigan, clinching with him, he grasped it. The momentum of the object, and his own weakness, carried him back and down, and with the object in his grasp he fell, underneath, to the floor. He saw a face close to his—Braman's—and remembering that the banker had tripped him, he began to work his right fist into the other's face.

He would have finished Braman. He did not know that the man who had greeted him as "ol' 'Brand'" had smashed the banker in the forehead with the butt of a pistol when the banker had tried to bar his progress at the doorway; he was not aware that the force of the blow had hurled Braman against him, and that the latter, half unconscious, was not defending himself. He would not have cared had he known these things, for he was fighting blindly, doggedly, recklessly—fighting two men, he thought. And though he sensed that there could be but one end to such a struggle, he hammered away with ferocious malignance, and in the abandon of his passion in this extremity he was recklessly swinging his broken left arm, driving it at Braman, groaning each time the fist landed.

He felt hands grasping him, and he fought them off, smashing weakly at faces that appeared around him as he was dragged to his feet. He heard a voice say: "His arm's bruk," and the voice seemed to clear the atmosphere. He paused, holding back a blow, and the dancing blur of faces assumed a proper aspect and he saw the man who had hit the banker.

"Hello Mullarky!" he grinned, reeling drunkenly in the arms of his friends. "Come to see the picnic? Where's my—"

He saw Corrigan leaning against a wall of the room and lurched toward him. A dozen hands held him back—the room was full of men; and as his brain cleared he recognized some of them. He heard threats, mutterings, against Corrigan, and he laughed, bidding the men to hold their peace, that it was a "fair fight."

Corrigan was unmoved by the threats—as he was unmoved by Trevison's words. He leaned against the wall, weak, his arms hanging at his sides, his face macerated, grinning contemptuously. And then, despite his objections, Trevison was dragged away by Mullarky and the others, leaving Braman stretched out on the floor, and Corrigan, his knees sagging, his chin almost on his chest, standing near the wall. Trevison turned as he was forced out of the door, and grinned tauntingly at his tired enemy. Corrigan spat at him.

Half an hour later, his damaged arm bandaged, and some marks of the battle removed, Trevison was in the banking room. He had forbidden any of his friends to accompany him, but Mullarky and several others stood outside the door and watched him.

A bandage around his head, Braman leaned on the counter behind the wire netting, pale, shaking. In a chair at the desk sat Corrigan, glowering at Trevison. The big man's face had been attended to, but it was swollen frightfully, and his smashed lips were in a horrible pout. Trevison grinned at him, but it was to the banker that he spoke.

"I want my gun, Braman," he said, shortly.

The banker took it out of a drawer and silently shoved it across the counter and through a little opening in the wire netting. The banker watched, fearfully, as Trevison shoved the weapon into its holster. Corrigan stolidly followed his movements.

The gun in its holster, Trevison leaned toward the banker.

"I always knew you weren't straight, Braman. But we won't quarrel about that now. I just want you to know that when this arm of mine is right again, we'll try to square things between us. Broom handles will be barred that day."

Braman was silent and uneasy as he watched Trevison reach into a pocket and withdraw a leather bill-book. From this he took a paper and tossed it in through the opening of the wire netting.

"Cash it," he directed. "It's about the matter we were discussing when we were interrupted by our blood-thirsty friend, there."

He looked at Corrigan while Braman examined the paper, his eyes alight with the mocking, unfearing gleam that had been in them during the fight. Corrigan scowled and Trevison grinned at him—the indomitable, mirthless grin of the reckless fighting man; and Corrigan filled his lungs slowly, watching him with half-closed eyes. It was as though both knew that a distant day would bring another clash between them.

Braman fingered the paper uncertainly, and looked at Corrigan.

"I suppose this is all regular?" he said. "You ought to know something about it—it's a check from the railroad company for the right-of-way through Mr. Trevison's land."

Corrigan's eyes brightened as he examined the check. They filled with a hard, sinister light.

"No," he said; "it isn't regular." He took the check from Braman and deliberately tore it into small pieces, scattering them on the floor at his feet. He

smiled vindictively, settling back into his chair. "‘Brand’ Trevison, eh?" he said. "Well, Mr. Trevison, the railroad company isn't ready to close with you."

Trevison had watched the destruction of the check without the quiver of an eyelash. A faint, ironic smile curved the corners of his mouth as Corrigan concluded.

"I see," he said quietly. "You were not man enough to beat me a little while ago—even with the help of Braman's broom. You're going to take it out on me through the railroad; you're going to sneak and scheme. Well, you're in good company—anything that you don't know about skinning people Braman will tell you. But I'm letting you know this: The railroad company's option on my land expired last night, and it won't be renewed. If it's fight you're looking for, I'll do my best to accommodate you."

Corrigan grunted, and idly drummed with the fingers of one hand on the top of the desk, watching Trevison steadily. The latter opened his lips to speak, changed his mind, grinned and went out. Corrigan and Braman watched him as he stopped for a moment outside to talk with his friends, and their gaze followed him until he mounted Nigger and rode out of town. Then the banker looked at Corrigan, his brows wrinkling.

"You know your business, Jeff," he said; "but you've picked a tough man in Trevison."

Corrigan did not answer. He was glowering at the pieces of the check that lay on the floor at his feet.

CHAPTER IV

THE LONG ARM OF POWER

P RESENTLY Corrigan lit a cigar, biting the end off carefully, to keep it from coming in contact with his bruised lips. When the cigar was going well, he looked at Braman.

"What is Trevison?"

Pale, still dizzy from the effects of the blow on the head, Braman, who was leaning heavily on the counter, smiled wryly:

"He's a holy terror—you ought to know that. He's a reckless, don't-give-a-damn fool who has forgotten there's such a thing as consequences. 'Firebrand' Trevison, they call him. And he lives up to what that means. The folks in this section of the country swear by him."

Corrigan made a gesture of impatience. "I mean—what does he do? Of course I know he owns some land here. But how much land does he own?"

"You saw the figure on the check, didn't you? He owns five thousand acres."

"How long has he been here?"

"You've got me. More than ten years, I guess, from what I can gather."

"What was he before he came here?"

"I couldn't even surmise that—he don't talk about his past. From the way he waded into you, I should judge he was a prize fighter before becoming a cow-puncher."

Corrigan glared at the banker. "Yes; it's damned funny," he said. "How did he get his land?"

"Proved on a quarter-section. Bought the rest of it—and bought it mighty cheap." Braman's eyes brightened. "Figure on attacking *his* title?"

Corrigan grunted. "I notice he asked you for cash. You're not his banker, evidently."

"He banks in Las Vegas, I guess."

"What about his cattle?"

"He shipped three thousand head last season."

"How big is his outfit?"

"He's got about twenty men. They're all hard cases—like him, and they'd shoot themselves for him."

Corrigan got up and walked to the window, from where he looked out at Manti. The town looked like an army camp. Lumber, merchandise, supplies of every description, littered the street in mounds and scattered heaps, awaiting the erection of tent-house and building. But there was none of that activity that might have been expected from the quantity of material on hand; it seemed that the owners were waiting, delaying in anticipation of some force that would give them encouragement. They were reluctant to risk their money in erecting buildings on the strength of mere rumor. But they had come, hoping.

Corrigan grinned at Braman. "They're afraid to take a chance," he said, meaning Manti's citizens.

"Don't blame them. I've spread the stuff around—as you told me. That's all they've heard. They're here on a forlorn hope. The boom they are looking for, seems, from present conditions, to be lurking somewhere in the future, shadowed by an indefiniteness that to them is vaguely connected with somebody's promise of a dam, agricultural activity to follow, and factories. They haven't been able to trace the rumors, but they're here, and they'll make things hum if they get a chance."

"Sure," grinned Corrigan. "A boom town is always a graft for first arrivals. That is, boom towns *have* been. But Manti—" He paused.

"Yes, different," chuckled the banker. "It must have cost a wad to shove that water grant through."

"Benham kicked on the price—it was enough."

"That maximum rate clause is a pippin. You can soak them the limit right from the jump."

"And scare them out," scoffed Corrigan. "That isn't the game. Get them here, first. Then—"

The banker licked his lips. "How does old Benham take it?"

"Mr. Benham is enthusiastic because everything will be done in a perfectly legitimate way—he thinks."

"And the courts?"

"Judge Lindman, of the District Court now in Dry Bottom, is going to establish himself here. Benham pulled that string."

"Good!" said Braman. "When is Lindman coming?"

Corrigan's smile was crooked; it told eloquently of conscious power over the man he had named.

"He'll come whenever I give the word. Benham's got something on him."

"You always were a clever son-of-a-gun!" laughed the banker, admiringly.

Ignoring the compliment, Corrigan walked into the rear room, where he gazed frowningly at his reflection in a small glass affixed to the wall. Re-entering the banking room he said:

"I'm in no condition to face Miss Benham. Go down to the car and tell her that I shall be very busy here all day, and that I won't be able to see her until late tonight."

Miss Benham's name was on the tip of the banker's tongue, but, glancing at Corrigan's face, he decided that it was no time for that particular brand of levity. He grabbed his hat and stepped out of the front door.

Left alone, Corrigan paced slowly back and forth in the room, his brows furrowed thoughtfully. Trevison had become an important figure in his mind. Corrigan had not hinted to Braman, to Trevison, or to Miss Benham, of the actual situation—nor would he. But during his first visit to town that morning he had stood in one of the front windows of a saloon across the street. He had not been getting acquainted, as he had told Miss Benham, for the saloon had been the first place that he had entered, and after getting a drink at the bar he had sauntered to the window. From there he had seen "Brand" Trevison ride into town, and because Trevison made an impressive figure he had watched him, instinctively aware that in the rider of the black horse was a quality of manhood that one meets

rarely. Trevison's appearance had caused him a throb of disquieting envy.

He had noticed Trevison's start upon getting his first glimpse of the private car on the siding. He had followed Trevison's movements carefully, and with increased disquiet. For, instead of dismounting and going into a saloon or a store, Trevison had urged the black on, past the private car, which he had examined leisurely and intently. The clear morning air made objects at a distance very distinct, and as Trevison had ridden past the car, Corrigan had seen a flutter at one of the windows; had caught a fleeting glimpse of Rosalind Benham's face. He had seen Trevison ride away, to return for a second view of the car a few minutes later. At breakfast, Corrigan had not failed to note Miss Benham's lingering glances at the black horse, and again, in the bank, with her standing at the door, he had noticed her interest in the black horse and its rider. His quickly-aroused jealousy and hatred had driven him to the folly of impulsive action, a method which until now, he had carefully evaded. Yes, he had found "Brand" Trevison a worthy antagonist—Braman had him appraised correctly.

Corrigan's smile was bitter as he again walked into the rear room and surveyed his reflection in the glass. Disgusted, he turned to one of the windows and looked out. From where he stood he could see straight down the railroad tracks to the cut, down the wall of which, some hours before, Trevison had ridden the black horse. The dinky engine, with its train of flat-cars, was steaming toward him. As he watched, engine and

cars struck the switch and ran onto the siding, where they came to a stop. Corrigan frowned and looked at his watch. It lacked fully three hours to quitting time, and the cars were empty, save for the laborers draped on them, their tools piled in heaps. While Corrigan watched, the laborers descended from the cars and swarmed toward their quarters—a row of tent-houses near the siding. A big man—Corrigan knew him later as Patrick Carson—swung down from the engine-cab and lumbered toward the little frame station house, in a window of which the telegrapher could be seen, idly scanning a week-old newspaper. Carson spoke shortly to the telegrapher, at which the latter motioned toward the bank building and the private car. Then Carson came toward the bank building. An instant later, Carson came in the front door and met Corrigan at the wire netting.

“Hullo,” said the Irishman, without preliminaries; “the agent was tellin’ me I’d find a mon named Corrigan here. You’re in charge, eh?” he added at Corrigan’s affirmative. “Well, bedad, somebody’s got to be in charge from now on. The Willie-boy engineer from who I’ve been takin’ me orders has sneaked away to Dry Bottom for a couple av days, shovin’ the responsibility on me—an’ I ain’t feelin’ up to it. I’m a daisy construction boss, if I do say it meself, but I ain’t enough of a fightin’ mon to buck the business end av a six-shooter.”

“What’s up?”

“Mebbe you’d know—he said you’d be sure to. I’ve been parleyin’ wid a fello’ named ‘Firebrand’

Trevison, an' I'm that soaked wid perspiration that me boots is full av it, after me thryin' to urge him to be dacently careful wid his gun!"

"What happened?" asked Corrigan, darkly.

"This mon Trevison came down through the cut this mornin', goin' to town. He was pleasant as a mon who's had a raise in wages, an' he was joshin' wid us. A while ago he comes back from town, an' he's that cold an' polite that he'd freeze ye while he's takin' his hat off to ye. One av his arms is busted, an' he's got a welt or two on his face. But outside av that he's all right. He rides down into the cut where we're all workin' fit to kill ourselves. He halts his big black horse about forty or fifty feet away from the ol' rattle-box that runs the steam shovel, an' he grins like a tiger at me an' says:

"'Carson, I'm wantin' you to pull your min off. I can't permit anny railroad min on the Diamond K property. You're a friend av mine, an' all that, but you'll have to pull your freight. You've got tin minutes.'

"'I've got me orders to do this work,' I says—begging his pardon.

"'Here's your orders to stop doin' it!' he comes back. An' I was inspectin' the muzzle av his six-shooter.

"'Ye wudn't shoot a mon for doin' his duthy?' I says.

"'Thry me,' he says. 'You're trespassers. The railroad company didn't come through wid the coin for the right-of-way. Your mon, Corrigan, has got an

idee that he's goin' to bluff me. I'm callin' his bluff. You've got tin minutes to get out av here. At the end av that time I begin to shoot. I've got six catridges in the gun, an' fifty more in the belt around me middle. An' I seldom miss whin I shoot. It's up to you whether I start a cemetery here or not,' he says, cold an' ca'mlike.

"The ginneys knowed somethin' was up, an' they crowded around. I thought Trevison was thryin' to run a bluff on *me*, an' I give orders for the ginneys to go back to their work.

"Trevison didn't say another word, but at the end av the tin minutes he grins that tiger grin av his an' busts the safety valve on the rattle-box wid a shot from his pistol. He smashes the water-gauge wid another, an' jammed one shot in the ol' rattle-box's entrails, an' she starts to blow off steam—shriekin' like a soul in hell. The ginneys throwed down their tools an' started to climb up the walls of the cut like a gang av monkeys, Trevison watchin' thim with a grin as cold as a barrow ful ov icicles. Murph', the engineer av the dinky, an' his fireman, ducks for the engine-cab, l'avin' me standin' there to face the music. Trevison yells at the engineer av the rattle-box, an' he disappears like a rat into a hole. Thin Trevison swings his gun on me, an' I c'u'd feel me knees knockin' together. 'Carson,' he says, 'I hate like blazes to do it, but you're the boss here, an' these min will do what you tell thim to do. Tell thim to get to hell out of here an' not come back, or I'll down you, sure as me name's Trevison!'

"I'm old enough to know from lookin' at a mon whether he manes business or not, an' Trevison wasn't foolin'. So I got the bhoys away, an' here we are. If you're in charge, it's up to you to smooth things out. Though from the looks av your mug 'Firebrand's' been maulin' you some, too!"

Corrigan's answer was a cold glare. "You quit without a fight, eh?" he taunted; "you let one man bluff half a hundred of you!"

Carson's eyes brightened. "My recollection is that 'Firebrand' is still holdin' the forrt. Whin I got me last look at him he was sittin' on the top av the cut, like he was intendin' to stay there indefinite. If ye think he's bluffin', mebbe it'd be quite an idee for you to go out there yourself, an' call it. I'd be willin' to give ye me moral support."

"I'll call him when I get ready." Corrigan went to the desk and sat in the chair, ignoring Carson, who watched him narrowly. Presently he turned and spoke to the man:

"Put your men at work trueing up the roadbed on the next section back, until further orders."

"An' let 'Firebrand' hold the forrt?"

"Do as you're told!"

Carson went out to his men. Near the station platform he turned and looked back at the bank building, grinning. "There's two bulldogs comin' to grips in this deal or I'm a domn poor prophet!" he said.

When Braman returned from his errand he found Corrigan staring out of the window. The banker announced that Miss Benham had received Corrigan's

message with considerable equanimity, and was rewarded for his levity with a frown.

"What's Carson and his gang doing in town?" he queried.

Corrigan told him, briefly. The banker whistled in astonishment, and his face grew long. "I told you he is a tough one!" he reminded.

Corrigan got to his feet. "Yes—he's a tough one," he admitted. "I'm forced to alter my plans a little—that's all. But I'll get him. Hunt up something to eat," he directed; "I'm hungry. I'm going to the station for a few minutes."

He went out, and the banker watched him until he vanished around the corner of a building. Then Braman shook his head. "Jeff's resourceful," he said. "But Trevison—" His face grew solemn. "What a damned fool I was to trip him with that broom!" He drew a pistol from a pocket and examined it intently, then returned it to the pocket and sat, staring with unseeing eyes beyond the station at the two lines of steel that ran out upon the plains and stopped in the deep cut on the crest of which he could see a man on a black horse.

Down at the station Corrigan was leaning on a rough wooden counter, writing on a yellow paper pad. When he had finished he shoved the paper over to the telegrapher, who had been waiting:

J. CHALFANT BENHAM, B— Building, New York.

Unexpected opposition developed. Trevison. Give Lindman removal order immediately. Communicate with me at Dry Bottom tomorrow morning.

CORRIGAN.

Corrigan watched the operator send the message and then he returned to the bank building, where he found Braman setting out a meager lunch in the rear room. The two men talked as they ate, mostly about Trevison, and the banker's face did not lose its worried expression. Later they smoked and talked and watched while the afternoon sun grew mellow; while the somber twilight descended over the world and darkness came and obliterated the hill on which sat the rider of the black horse.

Shortly after dark Corrigan sent the banker on another errand, this time to a boarding-house at the edge of town. Braman returned shortly, announcing: "He'll be ready." Then, just before midnight Corrigan climbed into the cab of the engine which had brought the private car, and which was waiting, steam up, several hundred feet down the track from the car.

"All right!" said Corrigan briskly, to the engineer, as he climbed in and a flare from the fire-box suffused his face; "pull out. But don't make any fuss about it—I don't want those people in the car to know." And shortly afterwards the locomotive glided silently away into the darkness toward that town in which a judge of the United States Court had, a few hours before, received orders which had caused him to remark, bitterly: "So does the past shape the future."

CHAPTER V

A TELEGRAM AND A GIRL

BANKER BRAMAN went to bed on the cot in the back room shortly after Corrigan departed from Manti. He stretched himself out with a sigh, oppressed with the conviction that he had done a bad day's work in antagonizing Trevison. The Diamond K owner would repay him, he knew. But he knew, too, that he need have no fear that Trevison would sneak about it. Therefore he did not expect to feel Trevison at his throat during the night. That was some satisfaction.

He dropped to sleep, thinking of Trevison. He awoke about dawn to a loud hammering on the rear door, and he scrambled out of bed and opened the door upon the telegraph agent. That gentleman gazed at him with grim reproof.

"Holy Moses!" he said; "you're a hell of a tight sleeper! I've been pounding on this door for an age!" He shoved a sheet of paper under Braman's nose. "Here's a telegram for you."

Braman took the telegram, scanning it, while the agent talked on, ramblingly. A sickly smile came over Braman's face when he finished reading, and then he listened to the agent:

"I got a wire a little after midnight, asking me if that man, Corrigan, was still in Manti. The engineer told me he was taking Corrigan back to Dry Bottom at midnight, and so I knew he wasn't here, and I clicked back 'No.' It was from J. C. He must have connected with Corrigan at Dry Bottom. That guy Trevison must have old Benham's goat, eh?"

Braman re-read the telegram; it was directed to him:

Send my daughter to Trevison with cash in amount of check destroyed by Corrigan yesterday. Instruct her to say mistake made. No offense intended. Hustle. J. C. BENHAM.

Braman slipped his clothes on and ran down the track to the private car. He had known J. C. Benham several years and was aware that when he issued an order he wanted it obeyed, literally. The negro auto-crat of the private car met him at the platform and grinned amply at the banker's request.

"Miss Benham done tol' me she am not to be disturbed till eight o'clock," he objected. But the telegram in Braman's hands had instant effect upon the black custodian of the car, and shortly afterward Miss Benham was looking at the banker and his telegram in sleepy-eyed astonishment, the door of her compartment open only far enough to permit her to stick her head out.

Braman was forced to do much explaining, and concluded by reading the telegram to her. She drew everything out of him except the story of the fight.

"Well," she said in the end, "I suppose I shall have to go. So his name is 'Brand' Trevison. And he won't

permit the men to work. Why did Mr. Corrigan destroy the check?"

Braman evaded, but the girl thought she knew. Corrigan had yielded to an impulse of obstinacy provoked by Trevison's assault on him. It was not good business—it was almost childish; but it was human to feel that way. She felt a slight disappointment in Corrigan, though; the action did not quite accord with her previous estimate of him. She did not know what to think of Trevison. But of course any man who would deliberately and brutally ride another man down, would naturally not hesitate to adopt other lawless means of defending himself.

She told Braman to have the money ready for her in an hour, and at the end of that time with her morocco handbag bulging, she emerged from the front door of the bank and climbed the steps of the private car, which had been pulled down to a point in front of the station by the dinky engine, with Murphy presiding at the throttle.

Carson was standing on the platform when Miss Benham climbed to it, and he grinned and greeted her with:

"If ye have no objections, ma'am, I'll be ridin' down to the cut with ye. Me name's Patrick Carson, ma'am."

"I have no objection whatever," said the lady, graciously. "I presume you are connected with the railroad?"

"An' wid the ginneys that's buildin' it, ma'am," he supplemented. "I'm the construction boss av this section, an' I'm the mon that had the unhappy experience

av lookin' into the business end av 'Firebrand's' six-shooter yisterday."

"'Firebrand's'?" she said, with a puzzled look at him.

"Thot mon, Trevison, ma'am; that's what they call him. An' he fits it bedad—beggin' your pardon."

"Oh," she said; "then you know him." And she felt a sudden interest in Carson.

"Enough to be certain he ain't to be monkeyed with, ma'am."

She seemed to ignore this. "Please tell the engineer to go ahead," she told him. "And then come into the car—I want to talk with you."

A little later, with the car clicking slowly over the rail-joints toward the cut, Carson diffidently followed the negro attendant into a luxurious compartment, in which, seated in a big leather-covered chair, was Miss Benham. She motioned Carson to another chair, and in the conversation that followed Miss Benham received a comprehensive estimate of Trevison from Carson's viewpoint. It seemed unsatisfying to her—Carson's commendation did not appear to coincide with Trevison's performances.

"Have you heard what happened in Manti yesterday?" she questioned. "This man, Trevison, jumped his horse against Mr. Corrigan and knocked him down."

"I heard av it," grinned Carson. "But I didn't see it. Nor did I see the daisy scrap that tuk place right after."

"Fight?" she exclaimed.

Carson reddened. "Sure, ye haven't heard av it, an' I'm blabbin' like a kid."

"Tell me about it." Her eyes were aglow with interest.

"There's devilish little to tell—beggin' your pardon, ma'am. But thim that was in at the finish is waggin' their tongues about it bein' a dandy shindy. Judgin' from the talk, nobuddy got licked—it was a fair dhraw. But I sh'ud judge, lookin' at Corrigan's face, that it was a darlin' av a scrap."

She was silent, gazing contemplatively out of the car window. Corrigan had returned, after escorting her to the car, to engage in a fight with Trevison. That was what had occupied him; that was why he had gone away without seeing her. Well, Trevison had given him plenty of provocation.

"Trevison's horse knockin' Corrigan down was what started it, they've been tellin' me," said Carson. "But thim that know Trevison's black knows that Trevison wasn't to blame."

"Not to blame?" she asked; "why not?"

"For the simple rayson thot in a case like thot the mon has no control over the baste, ma'am. 'Fire-brand' told me only yisterday mornin' thot there was no holdin' the black whin somebuddy tried to shoot wid him on his back."

The girl remembered how Trevison had tried to speak to her immediately after the upsetting of Corrigan, and she knew now, that he had wanted to explain his action. Reviewing the incident in the light of Carson's explanation, she felt that Corrigan was quite as

much at fault as Trevison. Somehow, that knowledge was vaguely satisfying.

She did not succeed in questioning Carson further about Trevison, though there were many points over which she felt a disturbing curiosity, for Agatha came in presently, and after nodding stiffly to Carson, seated herself and gazed aloofly out of a window.

Carson, ill at ease in Agatha's presence, soon invented an excuse to go out upon the platform, leaving Rosalind to explain his presence in the car.

"What on earth could you have to say to a section boss—or he to you?" demanded Agatha. "You are becoming very—er—indiscreet, Rosalind."

The girl smiled. It was a smile that would have betrayed the girl had Agatha possessed the physiognomist's faculty of analyzation, for in it was much relief and renewed faith. For the rider of the black horse was not the brutal creature she had thought him.

When the private car came to a stop, Rosalind looked out of the window to see the steep wall of the cut towering above her. Aunt Agatha still sat near, and when Rosalind got up Agatha rose also, registering an objection:

"I think your father might have arranged to have some *man* meet this outlaw. It is not, in my opinion, a proper errand for a girl. But if you are determined to go, I presume I shall have to follow."

"It won't be necessary," said Rosalind. But Agatha set her lips tightly. And when the girl reached the platform Agatha was close behind her.

But both halted on the platform as they were about to descend the steps. They heard Carson's voice, loud and argumentative:

"There's a lady aboord, I tell ye! If ye shoot, you're a lot of damned rapscallions, an' I'll come up there an' bate the head off ye!"

"Stow your gab an' produce the lady!" answered a voice. It came from above, and Rosalind stepped down to the floor of the cut and looked upward. On the crest of the southern wall were a dozen men—cowboys—armed with rifles, peering down at the car. They shifted their gaze to her when she stepped into view, and one of them laughed.

"Correct, boys," he said; "it's a lady." There was a short silence; Rosalind saw the men gather close—they were talking, but she could not hear their voices. Then the man who had spoken first stepped to the edge of the cut and called: "What do you want?"

The girl answered: "I want to speak with Mr. Trevison."

"Sorry, ma'am," came back the voice; "but Trevison ain't here—he's at the Diamond K."

Rosalind reached a decision quickly. "Aunty," she said; "I am going to the Diamond K."

"I forbid you!" said Agatha sternly. "I would not trust you an instant with those outlaws!"

"Nonsense," smiled Rosalind. "I am coming up," she called to the man on the crest; "do you mind?"

The man laughed. "I reckon not, ma'am."

Rosalind smiled at Carson, who was watching her admiringly, and to the smile he answered, pointing east-

ward to where the slope of the hill melted into the plains: "You'll have to go thot way, ma'am." He laughed. "You're perfectly safe wid thim min, ma'am—they're Trevison's—an' Trevison wud shoot the last mon av thim if they'd harm a hair av your pretty head. Go along, ma'am, an' God bless ye! Ye'll be savin' a heap av throuble for me an' me ginneys, an' the railroad company." He looked with bland derision at Agatha who gave him a glance of scornful reproof as she followed after her charge.

The girl was panting when she reached the crest of the cut. Agatha was a little white, possibly more from apprehension than from indignation, though that emotion had its influence; but their reception could not have been more formal had it taken place in an eastern drawing-room. For every hat was off, and each man was trying his best to conceal his interest. And when men have not seen a woman for a long time, the appearance of a pretty one makes it rather hard to maintain polite poise. But they succeeded, which spoke well for their manliness. If they exchanged surreptitious winks over the appearance of Agatha, they are to be excused, for that lady's demeanor was one of frigid haughtiness, which is never quite impressive to those who live close to nature.

In an exchange of words, brief and pointed, Rosalind learned that it was three miles to the Diamond K ranchhouse, and that Trevison had given orders not to be disturbed unless the railroad company attempted to continue work at the cut. Could she borrow one of their horses, and a guide?

"You bet!" emphatically returned the spokesman who, she learned later, was Trevison's foreman. She should have the gentlest "cayuse" in the "bunch," and the foreman would do the guiding, himself. At which word Agatha, noting the foreman's enthusiasm, glared coldly at him.

But here Agatha was balked by the insurmountable wall of convention. She had ridden horses, to be sure, in her younger days; but when the foreman, at Rosalind's request, offered her a pony, she sniffed scornfully and marched down the slope toward the private car, saying that if Rosalind was *determined* to persist she might persist without *her* assistance. For there was no side-saddle in the riding equipment of the outfit. And Rosalind, quite aware of the prudishness exhibited by her chaperon, and not unmindful of the mirth that the men were trying their best to keep concealed, rode on with the foreman, with something resembling thankfulness for the temporary freedom tugging at her heart.

Trevison had camped all night on the crest of the cut. It was only at dawn that Barkwell, the foreman who had escorted Rosalind, had appeared at the cut on his way to town, and discovered him, and then the foreman's plans were changed and he was dispatched to the Diamond K for reinforcements. Trevison had ridden back to the Diamond K to care for his arm, which had pained him frightfully during the night, and at ten o'clock in the morning he was stretched out, fully dressed and wide awake on the bed in his room

in the ranchhouse, frowningly reviewing the events of the day before.

He was in no good humor, and when he heard Barkwell hallooing from the yard near the house, he got up and looked out of a window, a scowl on his face.

Rosalind was not in the best of spirits, herself, for during the ride to the ranchhouse she had been sending subtly-questioning shafts at the foreman—questions that mostly concerned Trevison—and they had all fell, blunted and impotent, from the armor of Barkwell's reticence. But a glance at Trevison's face, ludicrous in its expression of stunned amazement, brought a broad smile to her own. She saw his lips form her name, and then she waited demurely until she saw him coming out of the ranchhouse door toward her.

He had quite recovered from his surprise, she noted; his manner was that of the day before, when she had seen him riding the black horse. When she saw him coming lightly toward her, she at first had eyes for nothing but his perfect figure, feeling the strength that his close-fitting clothing revealed so unmistakably, and an unaccountable blush glowed in her cheeks. And then she observed that his left arm was in a sling, and a flash of wondering concern swept over her—also unaccountable. And then he was at her stirrup, smiling up at her broadly and cordially.

"Welcome to the Diamond K, Miss Benham," he said. "Won't you get off your horse?"

"Thank you; I came on business and must return immediately. There has been a misunderstanding, my

father says. He wired me, directing me to apologize, for him, for Mr. Corrigan's actions of yesterday. Perhaps Mr. Corrigan over-stepped his authority—I have no means of knowing." She passed the morocco bag over to him, and he took it, looking at it in some perplexity. "You will find cash in there to the amount named by the check that Mr. Corrigan destroyed. I hope," she added, smiling at him, "that there will be no more trouble."

"The payment of this money for the right-of-way removes the provocation for trouble," he laughed. "Barkwell," he directed, turning to the foreman; "you may go back to the outfit." He looked after the foreman as the latter rode away, turning presently to Rosalind. "If you will wait a few minutes, until I stow this money in a safe place, I'll ride back to the cut with you and pull the boys off."

She had wondered much over the rifles in the hands of his men at the cut. "Would your men have used their guns?" she asked.

He had turned to go to the house, and he wheeled quickly, astonished. "Certainly!" he said; "why not?"

"That would be lawlessness, would it not?" It made her shiver slightly to hear him so frankly confess to murderous designs.

"It was not my quarrel," he said, looking at her narrowly, his brows contracted. "Law is all right where everybody accepts it as a governor to their actions. I accept it when it deals fairly with me—when it's just. Certain rights are mine, and I'll fight

for them. This situation was brought on by Corrigan's obstinacy. We had a fight, and it peeved him because I wouldn't permit him to hammer my head off. He destroyed the check, and as the company's option expired yesterday it was unlawful for the company to trespass on my land."

"Well," she smiled, affected by his vehemence; "we shall have peace now, presumably. And—" she reddened again—"I want to ask your pardon on my own account, for speaking to you as I did yesterday. I thought you brutal—the way you rode your horse over Mr. Corrigan. Mr. Carson assured me that the horse was to blame."

"I am indebted to Carson," he laughed, bowing. Rosalind watched him go into the house, and then turned and inspected her surroundings. The house was big, roomy, with a massive hip roof. A paved gallery stretched the entire length of the front—she would have liked to rest for a few minutes in the heavy rocker that stood in its cool shadows. No woman lived here, she was certain, because there was a lack of evidence of woman's handiwork—no filmy curtains at the windows—merely shades; no cushion was on the chair—which, by the way, looked lonesome—but perhaps that was merely her imagination. Much dust had gathered on the gallery floor and on the sash of the windows—a woman would have had things looking differently. And so she divined that Trevison was not married. It surprised her to discover that that thought had been in her mind, and she turned to continue her inspection, filled with wonder that it had been there.

She got an impression of breadth and spaciousness out of her survey of the buildings and the surrounding country. The buildings were in good condition; everything looked substantial and homelike and her contemplation of it aroused in her a yearning for a house and land in this section of the country, it was so peaceful and dignified in comparison with the life she knew.

She watched Trevison when he emerged from the house, and smiled when he returned the empty handbag. He went to a small building near a fenced enclosure—the corral, she learned afterward—and came out carrying a saddle, which he hung on the fence while he captured the black horse, which she had already observed. The animal evaded capture, playfully, but in the end it trotted mincingly to Trevison and permitted him to throw the bridle on. Then, shortly afterward he mounted the black and together they rode back toward the cut.

As they rode the girl's curiosity for the man who rode beside her grew acute. She was aware—she had been aware all along—that he was far different from the other men of Manti—there was about him an atmosphere of refinement and quiet confidence that mingled admirably with his magnificent physical force, tempering it, suggesting reserve power, hinting of excellent mental capacity. She determined to know something about him. And so she began subtly:

“In a section of country so large as this it seems that our American measure of length—a mile—should be stretched to something that would more adequately express size. Don't you think so?”

He looked quickly at her. "That is an odd thought," he laughed, "but it inevitably attacks the person who views the yawning distances here for the first time. Why not use the English mile if the American doesn't satisfy?"

"There is a measure that exceeds that, isn't there? Wasn't there a Persian measure somewhat longer, fathered by Herodotus or another of the ancients? I am sure there was—or is—but I have forgotten?"

"Yes," he said, "—a parasang." He looked narrowly at her and saw her eyes brighten.

She had made progress; she felt much satisfaction.

"You are not a native," she said.

"How do you know?"

"Cowboys do not commonly measure their distances with parasangs," she laughed.

"Nor do ordinary women try to shake off ennui by coming West in private cars," he drawled.

She started and looking quickly at him. "How did you know that was what happened to me?" she demanded.

"Because you're too spirited and vigorous to spend your life dawdling in society. You yearn for action, for the broad, free life of the open. You're in love with this country right now."

"Yes, yes," she said, astonished; "but how do you know?"

"You might have sent a man here in your place—Braman, for instance; he could be trusted. You came yourself, eager for adventure—you came on a borrowed horse. When you were looking at the country

from the horse in front of my house, I saw you sigh."

"Well," she said, with flushed face and glowing eyes; "I *have* decided to live out here—for a time, at least. So you were watching me?"

"Just a glance," he defended, grinning; "I couldn't help it. Please forgive me."

"I suppose I'll have to," she laughed, delighted, reveling in this freedom of speech, in his directness. His manner touched a spark somewhere in her, she felt strangely elated, exhilarated. When she reflected that this was only their second meeting and that she had not been conventionally introduced to him, she was amazed. Had a stranger of her set talked to her so familiarly she would have resented it. Out here it seemed to be perfectly natural.

"How do you know I borrowed a horse to come here?" she asked.

"That's easy," he grinned; "there's the Diamond K brand on his hip."

"Oh."

They rode on a little distance in silence, and then she remembered that she was still curious about him. His frankness had affected her; she did not think it impertinent to betray curiosity.

"How long have you lived out here?" she asked.

"About ten years."

"You weren't born here, of course—you have admitted that. Then where did you come from?"

"This is a large country," he returned, unsmilingly.

It was a reproof, certainly—Rosalind could go no

farther in that direction. But her words had brought a mystery into existence, thus sharpening her interest in him. She was conscious, though, of a slight pique—what possible reason could he have for evasion? He had not the appearance of a fugitive from justice.

"So you're going to live out here?" he said, after an interval. "Where?"

"I heard father speak of buying Blakeley's place. Do you know where it is?"

"It adjoins mine." There was a leaping note in his voice, which she did not fail to catch. "Do you see that dark line over there?" He pointed eastward—a mile perhaps. "That's a gully; it divides my land from Blakeley's. Blakeley told me a month ago that he was dickering with an eastern man. If you are thinking of looking the place over, and want a trustworthy escort I should be pleased to recommend—myself." And he grinned widely at her.

"I shall consider your offer—and I thank you for it," she returned. "I feel positive that father will buy a ranch here, for he has much faith in the future of Manti—he is obsessed with it."

He looked sharply at her. "Then your father is going to have a hand in the development of Manti? I heard a rumor to the effect that some eastern company was interested, had, in fact, secured the water rights for an enormous section."

She remembered what Corrigan had told her, and blushinglly dissembled:

"I put no faith in rumor—do you? Mr. Corrigan is the head of the company which is to develop

Manti. But of course *that* is an eastern company, isn't it?"

He nodded, and she smiled at a thought that came to her. "How far is it to Blakeley's ranchhouse?" she asked.

"About two parasangs," he answered gravely.

"Well," she said, mimicking him; "I could never walk there, could I? If I go, I shall have to borrow a horse—or buy one. Could you recommend a horse that would be as trustworthy as the escort you have promised me?"

"We shall go to Blakeley's tomorrow," he told her. "I shall bring you a trustworthy horse at ten o'clock in the morning."

They were approaching the cut, and she nodded an acceptance. An instant later he was talking to his men, and she sat near him, watching them as they raced over the plains toward the Diamond K ranchhouse. One man remained; he was without a mount, and he grinned with embarrassment when Rosalind's gaze rested on him.

"Oh," she said; "you are waiting for your horse! How stupid of me!" She dismounted and turned the animal over to him. When she looked around, Trevison had also dismounted and was coming toward her, leading the black, the reins looped through his arm. Rosalind flushed, and thought of Agatha, but offered no objection.

It was a long walk down the slope of the hill and around its base to the private car, but they made it still longer by walking slowly and taking the most

roundabout way. Three persons saw them coming—Agatha, standing rigid on the platform; the negro attendant, standing behind Agatha in the doorway, his eyes wide with interest; and Carson, seated on a boulder a little distance down the cut, grinning broadly.

"Bedad," he rumbled; "the bhoy's made a hit wid her, or I'm a sinner! But didn't I know he wud? The two bulldogs is goin' to have it now, sure as I'm a foot high!"

CHAPTER VI

A JUDICIAL PUPPET

BOWLING along over the new tracks toward Manti in a special car secured at Dry Bottom by Corrigan, one compartment of which was packed closely with books, papers, ledger records, legal documents, blanks, and even office furniture, Judge Lindman watched the landscape unfold with mingled feelings of trepidation, reluctance, and impotent regret. The Judge's face was not a strong one—had it been he would not have been seated in the special car, talking with Corrigan. He was just under sixty-five years, and their weight seemed to rest heavily upon him. His eyes were slightly bleary, and had a look of weariness, as though he had endured much and was utterly tired. His mouth was flaccid, the lips pouting when he compressed his jaws, giving his face the sullen, indecisive look of the brooder lacking the mental and physical courage of independent action and initiative. The Judge could be led; Corrigan was leading him now, and the Judge was reluctant, but his courage had oozed, back in Dry Bottom, when Corrigan had mentioned a culpable action which the Judge had regretted many times.

Some legal records of the county were on the table

between the two men. The Judge had objected when Corrigan had secured them from the compartment where the others were piled.

"It isn't regular, Mr. Corrigan," he had said; "no one except a legally authorized person has the right to look over those books."

"We'll say that I am legally authorized, then," grinned Corrigan. The look in his eyes was one of amused contempt. "It isn't the only irregular thing you have done, Lindman."

The Judge subsided, but back in his eyes was a slumbering hatred for this man, who was forcing him to complicity in another crime. He regretted that other crime; why should this man deliberately remind him of it?

After looking over the records, Corrigan outlined a scheme of action that made the Judge's face blanch.

"I won't be a party to any such scurrilous undertaking!" he declared when he could trust his voice; "I—I won't permit it!"

Corrigan stretched his legs out under the table, shoved his hands into his trousers' pockets and laughed.

"Why the high moral attitude, Judge? It doesn't become you. Refuse if you like. When we get to Manti I shall wire Benham. It's likely he'll feel pretty sore. He's got his heart set on this. And I have no doubt that after he gets my wire he'll jump the next train for Washington, and—"

The Judge exclaimed with weak incoherence, and a few minutes later he was bending over the records with Corrigan—the latter making sundry copies on

a pad of paper, which he placed in a pocket when the work was completed.

At noon the special car was in Manti. Corrigan, the Judge, and Braman, carried the Judge's effects and stored them in the rear room of the bank building. "I'll build you a courthouse, tomorrow," he promised the Judge; "big enough for you and a number of deputies. You'll need deputies, you know." He grinned as the Judge shrank. Then, leaving the Judge in the room with his books and papers, Corrigan drew Braman outside.

"I got hell from Benham for destroying Trevison's check—he wired me to attend to my other deals and let him run the railroad—the damned old fool! You must have taken the cash to Trevison—I see the gang's working again."

"The cash went," said the banker, watching Corrigan covertly, "but I didn't take it. J. C. wired explicit orders for his daughter to act."

Corrigan cursed viciously, his face dark with wrath as he turned to look at the private car, on the switch. The banker watched him with secret, vindictive enjoyment. Miss Benham had judged Braman correctly—he was cold, crafty, selfish, and wholly devoid of sympathy. He was for Braman, first and last—and in the interim.

"Miss Benham went to the cut—so I hear," he went on, smoothly. "Trevison wasn't there. Miss Benham went to the Diamond K." His eyes gleamed as Corrigan's hands clenched. "Trevison rode back to the car with her—which she had ordered taken to the

cut," went on the banker. "And this morning about ten o'clock Trevison came here with a led horse. He and Miss Benham rode away together. I heard her tell her aunt they were going to Blakeley's ranch—it's about eight miles from here."

Corrigan's face went white. "I'll kill him for that!" he said.

"Jealous, eh?" laughed the banker. "So, that's the reason—"

Corrigan turned and struck bitterly. The banker's jaws clacked sharply—otherwise he fell silently, striking his head against the edge of the step and rolling, face down, into the dust.

When he recovered and sat up, Corrigan had gone. The banker gazed foolishly around at a world that was still reeling—felt his jaw carefully, wonder and astonishment in his eyes.

"What do you know about that?" he asked of the surrounding silence. "I've kidded him about women before, and he never got sore. He must be in love!"

Riding through a saccaton basin, the green-brown tips so high that they caught at their stirrups as they rode slowly along; a white, smiling sky above them and Blakeley's still three miles away, Miss Benham and Trevison were chatting gayly at the instant the banker had received Corrigan's blow.

Miss Benham had spent the night thinking of Trevison, and she had spent much of her time during the present ride stealing glances at him. She had discovered something about him that had eluded her the

day before — an impulsive boyishness. It was hidden behind the manhood of him, so that the casual observer would not be likely to see it; men would have failed to see it, because she was certain that with men he would not let it be seen. But she knew the recklessness that shone in his eyes, the energy that slumbered in them ready to be applied any moment in response to any whim that might seize him, were traits that had not yet yielded to the stern governors of manhood — nor would they yield in many years to come — they were the fountains of virility that would keep him young. She felt the irresistible appeal of him, responsive to the youth that flourished in her own heart — and Corrigan, older, more ponderous, less addicted to impulse, grew distant in her thoughts and vision. The day before yesterday her sympathies had been with Corrigan — she had thought. But as she rode she knew that they were threatening to desert him. For this man of heroic mold who rode beside her was disquietingly captivating in the bold recklessness of his youth.

They climbed the far slope of the basin and halted their horses on the crest. Before them stretched a plain so big and vast and inviting that it made the girl gasp with delight.

"Oh," she said, awed; "isn't it wonderful?"

"I knew you'd like it."

"The East has nothing like this," she said, with a broad sweep of the hand.

"No," he said.

She turned on him triumphantly. "There!" she

declared; "you have committed yourself. You are from the East!"

"Well," he said; "I've never denied it."

Something vague and subtle had drawn them together during the ride, bridging the hiatus of strangeness, making them feel that they had been acquainted long. It did not seem impertinent to her that she should ask the question that she now put to him—she felt that her interest in him permitted it:

"You are an easterner, and yet you have been out here for about ten years. Your house is big and substantial, but I should judge that it has no comforts, no conveniences. You live there alone, except for some men, and you have male servants—if you have any. Why should you bury yourself here? You are educated, you are young. There are great opportunities for you in the East!"

She paused, for she saw a cynical expression in his eyes.

"Well?" she said, impatiently, for she had been very much in earnest.

"I suppose I've got to tell you," he said, soberly. "I don't know what has come over me—you seem to have me under a spell. I've never spoken about it before. I don't know why I should now. But you've got to know, I presume."

"Yes."

"On your head rest the blame," he said, his grin still cynical; "and upon mine the consequences. It isn't a pretty story to tell; it's only virtue is its brevity. I was fired out of college for fighting. The fellows

I licked deserved what they got—and I deserved what I got for breaking rules. I've always broken rules. I may have broken laws—most of us have. My father is wealthy. The last time I saw him he said I was incorrigible and a dunce. I admit the former, but I'm going to make him take the other back. I told him so. He replied that he was from Missouri. He gave me an opportunity to make good by cutting off my allowance. There was a girl. When my allowance was cut off she made me feel cold as an Eskimo. Told me straight that she had never liked me in the way she'd led me to believe she did, and that she was engaged to a *real* man. She made the mistake of telling me his name, and it happened to be one of the fellows I'd had trouble with at college. The girl lost her temper and told me things he'd said about me. I left New York that night, but before I hopped on the train I stopped in to see my rival and gave him the bulliest trimming that I had ever given anybody. I came out here and took up a quarter-section of land. I bought more—after a while. I own five thousand acres, and about a thousand acres of it is the best coal land in the United States. I wouldn't sell it for love or money, for when your father gets his railroad running, I'm going to cash in on ten of the leanest and hardest and lonesomest years that any man ever put in. I'm going back some day. But I won't stay. I've lived in this country so long that it's got into my heart and soul. It's a golden paradise."

She did not share his enthusiasm—her thoughts were selfishly personal, though they included him.

"And the girl!" she said. "When you go back, would you—"

"Never!" he scoffed, vehemently. "That would convince me that I am the dunce my father said I was!"

The girl turned her head and smiled. And a little later, when they were riding on again, she murmured softly:

"Ten years of lonesomeness and bitterness to save his pride! I wonder if Hester Keyes knows what she has missed?"

CHAPTER VII

TWO LETTERS GO EAST

AFTER Agatha retired that night Rosalind sat for a long time writing at a little desk in the private car. She was tingling with excitement over a discovery she had made, and was yearning for a confidante. Since it had not been her habit to confide in Agatha, she did the next best thing, which was to indite a letter to her chum, Ruth Gresham. In one place she wrote:

"Do you remember Hester Keyes' love affair of ten years ago? You certainly must remember it! If you cannot, permit me to brush the dust of forgetfulness away. You cannot forget the night you met William Kinkaid? Of course you cannot forget that, for when you are Mrs. Kinkaid— But there! I won't poke fun at you. But I think every married person needs to treasure every shred of romance against inevitable hum-drum days. Isn't that a sad sentiment? But I want to get ahead with my reminder."

There followed much detail, having to do with Hester Keyes' party, to which neither Rosalind nor Ruth Gresham had been invited, for reasons which Rosalind presently made obvious. She continued:

"Of course, custom does not permit girls of fourteen to figure prominently at 'coming-out' parties, but

after one is there and is relegated to a stair-landing, one may use one's eyes without restriction. Do you remember my pointing out Hester Keyes' 'fellow'? But of course you didn't pay much attention to him after Billy Kinkaid sailed into your vision! But I envied Hester Keyes her eighteen years—and Trevison Brandon! He had the blackest eyes and hair! And he simply adored Hester! It made me feel positively savage when I heard shortly afterward that she had thrown him over—after his father cut him off—to take up with that fellow Harvey—I never could remember his first name. And she married Harvey—and regretted it, until Harvey died.

"Ruth, Trevison Brandon is out here. He calls himself 'Brand' Trevison. I met him two days ago, and I did not recognize him, he has changed so much. He puzzled me quite a little; but not even when I heard his name did I connect him with the man I had seen at Hester's party. Ten years is *such* a long time, isn't it? And I never did have much of a memory for names. But today he went with me to a certain ranch—Blakeley's—which, by the way, *father is going to buy*—and on the way we became very much acquainted, and he told me about his love affair. I placed him instantly, then, and why I didn't keel over was, I suppose, because of the curious big saddles they have out here, with enormous wooden *stirrups* on them. I can hear you exclaim over that plural, but there are no side-saddles. That is how it came that I was unchaperoned—Agatha won't take liberties with them, the saddles. Thank Heaven!"

There followed much more, with only one further reference to Trevison:

"He must be nearly thirty now, but he doesn't look it, he's so boyish. I gather, though, that he is regarded as a *man* out here, where, I understand, manhood is measured by something besides mere appearances. He owns acres and acres of land—some of it has coal on it; and he is sure to be enormously wealthy, some day. But I am twenty-four, myself."

The startling irrelevance of this sentence at first surprised Ruth Gresham, and then caused her eyes to brighten understandingly, as she read the letter a few days later. She remarked, musingly:

"The inevitable hum-drum days, eh? And yet most people long for them."

Another letter was written when the one to Ruth was completed. It was to J. Chalfant Benham.

"DEAR DADDY:

The West is a golden paradise. I could live here many, many years. I visited Mr. Blakeley today. He calls his ranch the Bar B. We wouldn't have to change the brand, would we? Trevison says the ranch is worth all Blakeley asks for it. Mr. Blakeley says we can take possession immediately, so I have decided to stay here. Mrs. Blakeley has invited me, and I am going to have my things taken over tomorrow. Since the Blakeley's are anxious to sell out and return South, don't you think you had better conclude the deal at once?

"Lovingly,

"ROSALIND."

CHAPTER VIII

THE CHAOS OF CREATION

THE West saw many "boom" towns. They followed in the wake of "gold strikes;" they grew, mushroom-like, overnight—garish husks of squalor, palpitating, hardy, a-tingle with extravagant hopes. A few, it is true, lived to become substantial cities buzzing with the American spirit, panting, fighting for progress with an energy that shamed the Old World, lethargic in its smug and self-sufficient superiority. But many towns died in their gangling youth, tragic monuments to hopes; but monuments also to effort, and to the pioneer courage and the dreams of an empire-building people.

Manti was destined to live. It was a boom town with material reasons for substantial growth. Behind it were the resources of a railroad company which would anticipate the development of a section of country bigger than a dozen Old-world states, and men with brains keen enough to realize the commercial possibilities it held. It had Corrigan for an advance agent—big, confident, magnetic, energetic, suave, smooth.

Manti had awaited his coming; he was the magic force, the fulfillment of the rumored promise. He had stayed away for three weeks, following his departure

on the special car after bringing Judge Lindman, and when he stepped off the car again at the end of that time Manti was "humming," as he had predicted. During the three weeks of his absence, the switch at Manti had never been unoccupied. Trains had been coming in regularly bearing merchandise, men, tools, machines, supplies. Engineers had arrived; the basin near Manti, choked by a narrow gorge at its westerly end (where the dam was to be built) was dotted with tents, wagons, digging implements, a miscellany of material whose hauling had worn a rutted trail over the plains and on the slope of the basin, continually active with wagon-train and pack horse, and articulate with sweating, cursing drivers.

"She's a pippin!" gleefully confided a sleek-looking individual who might have been mistaken for a western "parson" had it not been for a certain sophisticated cynicism that was prominent about him, and which imparted a distasteful taint of his profession. "Give me a year of this and I'll open a joint in Frisco! I cleaned out a brace of bull-whackers in the *Plaza* last night—their first pay. Afterward I stung a couple of cattlemen for a hundred each. Look at her hum!"

Notwithstanding that it was midday, Manti was teeming with life and action. Since the day that Miss Benham had viewed the town from the window of the private car, Manti had added more than a hundred buildings to its total. They were not attractive; they were ludicrous in their pitiful masquerade of substantial types. Here and there a three-story structure reared aloft, sheathed with galvanized iron, a garish aristo-

crat seemingly conscious of its superiority, brazen in its bid for attention; more modest buildings seemed dwarfed, humiliated, squatting sullenly and enviously. There were hotels, rooming-houses, boarding-houses, stores, dwellings, saloons — and others which for many reasons need not be mentioned. But they were pulsating with life, electric, eager, expectant. Taking advantage of the scarcity of buildings, an enterprising citizen had erected tents in rows on the street line, for whose shelter he charged enormously — and did a capacity business.

"A hundred came in on the last train," complained the over-worked station agent. "God knows what they all expect to do here!"

Corrigan had kept his promise to build Judge Lindman a courthouse. It was a flat-roofed structure, one story high, wedged between a saloon and Braman's bank building. A sign in the front window of Braman's bank announced that Jefferson Corrigan, agent of the Land & Improvement Company, of New York, had office space within, but on the morning of the day following his return to Manti, Corrigan was seated at one side of a flat-top desk in the courthouse, talking with Judge Lindman, who sat at the other side.

"Got them all transcribed?" asked Corrigan.

The Judge drew a thin ledger from his desk and passed it over to Corrigan. As Corrigan turned the pages and his face lighted, the Judge's grew correspondingly troubled.

"All right," exulted Corrigan. "This purports to be an accurate and true record of all the land trans-

actions in this section from the special grant to the Midland Company, down to date. It shows no intermediate owners from the Midland Company to the present claimants. As a document arraiguing carelessness on the part of land buyers it cannot be excelled. There isn't a present owner that has a legal leg to stand on!"

"There is only one weak point in your case," said the Judge, and his eyes gleamed with satisfaction, which he concealed by bowing his head. "It is that since these records show no sale of its property by the Midland Company, the Midland Company can come forward and re-establish its title."

Corrigan laughed and flipped a legal-looking paper in front of the Judge. The latter opened it and read, showing eagerness. He laid it down after reading, his hands trembling.

"It shows that the Midland Company—James Marchmont, president—transferred to Jefferson Corrigan, on a date prior to these other transactions, one-hundred thousand acres of land here—the Midland Company's entire holdings. Why, man, it is forgery!"

"No," said Corrigan quietly. "James Marchmont is alive. He signed his name right where it is. He'll confirm it, too, for he happens to be in something of the fix that you are in. Therefore, there being no records of any sales on your books—as revised, of course—" he laughed; "Jeff Corrigan is the legal possessor of one-hundred thousand acres of land right in the heart of what is going to be the boom section of the West!" He chuckled, lit a cigar, leaned back

in his chair and looked at the Judge. "All you have to do now is to enter that transaction on your records."

"You don't expect the present owners to yield their titles without a fight, do you?" asked the Judge. He spoke breathlessly.

Corrigan grunted. "Sure; they'll fight. But they'll lose. I've got them. I've got the power—the courts—the law, behind me. I've got them, and I'll squeeze them. It means a mint of money, man. It will make you. It's the biggest thing that any man ever attempted to pull off in this country!"

"Yes, it's big," groaned the Judge; "it's stupendous! It's frightful! Why, man, if anything goes wrong, it would mean—" He paused and shivered.

Corrigan smiled contemptuously. "Where's the original record?" he asked.

"I destroyed it," said the Judge. He did not look at Corrigan. "How?" demanded the latter.

"Burned it."

"Good." Corrigan rubbed his palms together. "It's too soon to start anything. Things are booming, and some of these owners will be trying to sell. Hold them off—don't record anything. Give them any excuse that comes to your mind. Have you heard from Washington?"

"The establishment of the court here has been confirmed."

"Quick work," laughed Corrigan. He got up, murmuring something about having to take care of some leases. When he turned, it was to start and stand rigid, his jaws set, his face pale. A man stood in the

open doorway—a man of about fifty apparently, furtive-eyed, slightly shabby, though with an atmosphere about him that hinted of past dignity of carriage.

“Jim Marchmont!” said Corrigan. He stepped forward, threateningly, his face dark with wrath. Without speaking another word he seized the newcomer by the coat collar, snapping his head back savagely, and dragged him back of a wooden partition. Concealed there from any of the curious in the street, he jammed Marchmont against the wall of the building, held him there with one hand and stuck a huge fist into his face.

“What in hell are you doing here?” he demanded. “Come clean, or I’ll tear you apart!”

The other laughed, but there was no mirth in it, and his thin lips were curved queerly, and were stiff and white. “Don’t get excited, Jeff,” he said; “it won’t be healthy.” And Corrigan felt something hard and cold against his shirt front. He knew it was a pistol and he released his hold and stepped back.

“Speaking of coming clean,” said Marchmont. “You crossed me. You told me you were going to sell the Midland land to two big ranch-owners. I find that you’re going to cut it up into lots and make big money—loads of it. You handed me a measly thousand. You stand to make millions. I want my divvy.”

“You’ve got your nerve,” scoffed Corrigan. “You got your bit when you sold the Midland before. You’re a self-convicted crook, and if you make a peep out here I’ll send you over the road for a thousand years!”

“Another thousand now,” said Marchmont: “and

ten more when you commence to cash in. Otherwise, a thousand years or not, I'll start yapping here and queer your game."

Corrigan's lips were in an ugly pout. For an instant it seemed he was going to defy his visitor. Then without a word to him he stepped around the partition, walked out the door and entered the bank. A few minutes later he passed a bundle of greenbacks to Marchmont and escorted him to the front door, where he stood, watching, his face unpleasant, until Marchmont vanished into one of the saloons.

"That settles *you*, you damned fool!" he said.

He stepped down into the street and went into the bank. Braman fawned on him, smirking insincerely. Corrigan had not apologized for striking the blow, had never mentioned it, continuing his former attitude toward the banker as though nothing had happened. But Braman had not forgiven him. Corrigan wasted no words:

"Who's the best gun-man in this section?"

Braman studied a minute. "Clay Levins," he said, finally.

"Can you find him?"

"Why, he's in town today; I saw him not more than fifteen minutes ago, going into the *Elk*!"

"Find him and bring him here—by the back way," directed Corrigan.

Braman went out, wondering. A few minutes later he returned, coming in at the front door, smiling with triumph. Shortly afterward Corrigan was opening the rear door on a tall, slender man of thirty-five, with a

thin face, a mouth that drooped at the corners, and alert, furtive eyes. He wore a heavy pistol at his right hip, low, the bottom of the holster tied to the leather chaps, and as Corrigan closed the door he noted that the man's right hand lingered close to the butt of the weapon.

"That's all right," said Corrigan; "you're perfectly safe here."

He talked in low tones to the man, so that Braman could not hear. Levins departed shortly afterwards, grinning crookedly, tucking a piece of paper into a pocket, upon which Corrigan had transcribed something that had been written on the cuff of his shirt sleeve. Corrigan went to his desk and busied himself with some papers. Over in the courthouse, Judge Lindman took from a drawer in his desk a thin ledger—a duplicate of the one he had shown Corrigan—and going to the rear of the room opened the door of an iron safe and stuck the ledger out of sight under a mass of legal papers.

When Marchmont left Corrigan he went straight to the *Plaza*, where he ordered a lunch and ate heartily. After finishing his meal he emerged from the saloon and stood near one of the front windows. One of the hundred dollar bills that Corrigan had given him he had "broke" in the *Plaza*, getting bills of small denomination in change, and in his right trousers' pocket was a roll that bulked comfortably in his hand. The feel of it made him tingle with satisfaction, as, except for the other thousand that Corrigan had given him some

months ago, it was the only money he had had for a long time. He knew he should take the next train out of Manti; that he had done a hazardous thing in baiting Corrigan, but he was lonesome and yearned for the touch and voice of the crowds that thronged in and out of the saloons and the stores, and presently he joined them, wandering from saloon to saloon, drinking occasionally, his content and satisfaction increasing in proportion to the quantity of liquor he drank.

And then, at about three o'clock, in the barroom of the *Plaza*, he heard a discordant voice at his elbow. He saw men crowding, jostling one another to get away from the spot where he stood—crouching, pale of face, their eyes on him. It made him feel that he was the center of interest, and he wheeled, staggering a little—for he had drunk much more than he had intended—to see what had happened. He saw Clay Levins standing close to him, his thin lips in a cruel curve, his eyes narrowed and glittering, his body in a suggestive crouch. The silence that had suddenly descended smote Marchmont's ears like a momentary deafness, and he looked foolishly around him, uncertain, puzzled. Levins' voice shocked him, sobered him, whitened his face:

"Fork over that coin you lifted from me in the *Elk*, you light-fingered hound!" said Levins.

Marchmont divined the truth now. He made his second mistake of the day. He allowed a flash of rage to trick him into reaching for his pistol. He got it into his hand and almost out of the pocket before Levins' first bullet struck him, and before he could

draw it entirely out the second savage bark of the gun in Levins' hand shattered the stillness of the room. Soundlessly, his face wreathed in a grin of hideous satire, Marchmont sank to the floor and stretched out on his back.

Before his body was still, Levins had drawn out the bills that had reposed in his victim's pocket. Crumpling them in his hand he walked to the bar and tossed them to the barkeeper.

"Look at 'em," he directed. "I'm provin' they're mine. Good thing I got the numbers on 'em." While the crowd jostled and crushed about him he read the numbers from the paper Corrigan had given him, grinning coldly as the barkeeper confirmed them. A deputy sheriff elbowed his way through the press to Levins' side, and the gun-man spoke to him, lightly: "I reckon everybody saw him reach for his gun when I told him to fork the coin over," he said, indicating his victim. "So you ain't got nothin' on me. But if you're figgerin' that the coin ain't mine, why I reckon a guy named Corrigan will back up my play."

The deputy took him at his word. They found Corrigan at his desk in the bank building.

"Sure," he said when the deputy had told his story; "I paid Levins the money this morning. Is it necessary for you to know what for? No? Well, it seems that the pickpocket got just what he deserved." He offered the deputy a cigar, and the latter went out, satisfied.

Later, Corrigan looked appraisingly at Levins, who still graced the office.

"That was rather an easy job," he said. "Marchmont was slow with a gun. With a faster man—a man, say—" he appeared to meditate "—like Trevison, for instance. You'd have to be pretty careful—"

"Trevison's my friend," grinned Levins coldly as he got to his feet. "There's nothin' doin' there—understand? Get it out of your brain-box, for if anything happens to 'Firebrand,' I'll perforate you sure as hell!"

He stalked out of the office, leaving Corrigan looking after him, frowningly.

CHAPTER IX

STRAIGHT TALK

TEN years of lonesomeness, of separation from all the things he held dear, with nothing for his soul to feed upon except the bitterness he got from a contemplation of the past; with nothing but his pride and his determination to keep him from becoming what he had seen many men in this country become — dissolute irresponsibles, drifting like ships without rudders — had brought into Trevison's heart a great longing. He was like a man who for a long time has been deprived of the solace of good tobacco, and — to use a simile that he himself manufactured — he yearned to capture someone from the East, sit beside him and fill his lungs, his brain, his heart, his soul, with the breath, the aroma, the spirit of the land of his youth. The appearance of Miss Benham at Manti had thrilled him. For ten years he had seen no eastern woman, and at sight of her the old hunger of the soul became acute in him, aroused in him a passionate worship that made his blood run riot. It was the call of sex to sex, made doubly stirring by the girl's beauty, her breeziness, her virile, alluring womanhood — by the appeal she made to the love of the good and the true in his character. His affection for Hester Keyes, he had long known, had

been merely the vanity-tickling regard of the callow youth—the sex attraction of adolescence, the “puppy” love that smites all youth alike. For Rosalind Benham a deeper note had been struck. Its force rocked him, intoxicated him; his head rang with the music it made.

During the three weeks of her stay at Blakeley's they had been much together. Rosalind had accepted his companionship as a matter of course. He had told her many things about his past, and was telling her many more things, as they sat today on an isolated excrescence of sand and rock and bunch grass surrounded by a sea of sage. From where they sat they could see Manti—Manti, alive, athrob, its newly-come hundreds busy as ants with their different pursuits.

The intoxication of the girl's presence had never been so great as it was today. A dozen times, drunken with the nearness of her, with the delicate odor from her hair, as a stray wisp fluttered into his face, he had come very near to catching her in his arms. But he had grimly mastered the feeling, telling himself that he was not a savage, and that such an action would be suicidal to his hopes. It cost him an effort, though, to restrain himself, as his flushed face, his burning eyes and his labored breath, told.

His broken wrist had healed. His hatred of Corrigan had been kept alive by a recollection of the fight, by a memory of the big man's quickness to take advantage of the banker's foul trick, and by the passion for revenge that had seized him, that held him in a burning clutch. Jealousy of the big man he would not have admitted; but something swelled his chest when he

thought of Corrigan coming West in the same car with the girl—a vague, gnawing something that made his teeth clench and his facial muscles cord.

Rosalind had not told him that she had recognized him, that during the ten years of his exile he had been her ideal, but she could close her eyes at this minute and imagine herself on the stair-landing at Hester Keyes' party, could feel the identical wave of thrilling admiration that had passed over her when her gaze had first rested on him. Yes, it had survived, that girlhood passion, but she had grown much older and experienced, and she could not let him see what she felt. But her curiosity was keener than ever; in no other man of her acquaintance had she felt this intense interest.

"I remember you telling me the other day that your men would have used their rifles, had the railroad company attempted to set men to work in the cut. I presume you must have given them orders to shoot. I can't understand you. You were raised in the East, your parents are wealthy; it is presumed they gave you advantages—in fact, you told me they had sent you to college. You must have learned respect for the law while there. And yet you would have had your men resist forcibly."

"I told you before that I respected the law—so long as the law is just and the fellow I'm fighting is governed by it. But I refuse to fight under a rule that binds one of my hands, while my opponent sails into me with both hands free. I've never been a believer in the doctrine of 'turn the other cheek.' We are made

with a capacity for feeling, and it boils, unrestrained, in me. I never could play the hypocrite; I couldn't say 'no' when I thought 'yes' and make anybody believe it. I couldn't lie and evade and side-step, even to keep from getting licked. I always told the truth and expressed my feelings in language as straight, simple, and direct as I could. It wasn't always the discreet way. Perhaps it wasn't always the wise way. I won't argue that. But it was the only way I knew. It caused me a lot of trouble—I was always in trouble. My record in college would make a prize fighter turn green with envy. I'm not proud of what I've made of my life. But I haven't changed. I do what my heart prompts me to do, and I say what I think, regardless of consequences."

"That would be a very good method—if everybody followed it," said the girl. "Unfortunately, it invites enmity. Subtlety will take you farther in the world." She was smitten with an impulse, unwise, unconventional. But the conventions! The East seemed effete and far. Besides, she spoke lightly:

"Let us be perfectly frank, then. I think that perhaps you take yourself too seriously. Life is a tragedy to the tragic, a joke to the humorous, a drab canvas to the unimaginative. It all depends upon what temperament one sees it through. I dare say that I see you differently than you see yourself. 'O wad some power the giftie gi'e us to see oursel's as ithers see us'," she quoted, and laughed at the queer look in his eyes, for his admiration for her had leaped like a living thing at her bubbling spirits, and he was, figuratively,

forced to place his heel upon it. "I confess it seems to me that you take a too tragic view of things," she went on. "You are like D'Artagnan, always eager to fly at somebody's throat. Possibly, you don't give other people credit for unselfish motives; you are too suspicious; and what you call plain talk may seem impertinence to others—don't you think? In any event, people don't like to hear the truth told about themselves—especially by a big, earnest, sober-faced man who seems to speak with conviction, and, perhaps, authority. I think you look for trouble, instead of trying to evade it. I think, too," she said, looking straight at him, "that you face the world in a too physical fashion; that you place too much dependence upon brawn and fire. That, following your own method of speaking your mind, is what I think of you. I tremble to imagine what you think of me for speaking so plainly."

He laughed, his voice vibrating, and bold passion gleamed in his eyes. He looked fairly at her, holding her gaze, compelling it with the intensity of his own, and she drew a deep, tremulous breath of understanding. There followed a tense, breathless silence. And then—

"You've brought it on yourself," he said. "I love you. You are going to marry me—some day. That's what I think of you!"

She got to her feet, her cheeks flaming, confused, half-frightened, though a fierce exultation surged within her. She had half expected this, half dreaded it, and now that it had burst upon her in such volcanic fashion she realized that she had not been entirely prepared.

She sought refuge in banter, facing him, her cheeks flushed, her eyes dancing.

"'Firebrand,'" she said. "The name fits you — Mr. Carson was right. I warned you — if you remember — that you placed too much dependence on brawn and fire. You are making it very hard for me to see you again."

He had risen too, and stood before her, and he now laughed frankly.

"I told you I couldn't play the hypocrite. I have said what I think. I want you. But that doesn't mean that I am going to carry you away to the mountains. I've got it off my mind, and I promise not to mention it again — until you wish it. But don't forget that some day you are going to love me."

"How marvelous," said she, tauntingly, though in her confusion she could not meet his gaze, looking downward. "How do you purpose to bring it about?"

"By loving you so strongly that you can't help yourself."

"With your confidence —" she began. But he interrupted, laughing:

"We're going to forget it, now," he said. "I promised to show you that *Pueblo*, and we'll have just about time enough to make it and back to the Bar B before dark."

And they rode away presently, chatting on indifferent subjects. And, keeping his promise, he said not another word about his declaration. But the girl, stealing glances at him, wondered much — and reached no decision.

When they reached the abandoned Indian village, many of its houses still standing, he laughed. "That would make a dandy fort."

"Always thinking of fighting," she mocked. But her eyes flashed as she looked at him.

CHAPTER X

THE SPIRIT OF MANTI

THE Bertram private car had clucked eastward over the rails three weeks before, bearing with it as a passenger only the negro autocrat. At the last moment, discovering that she could not dissuade Rosalind from her mad decision to stay at Blakeley's ranch, Agatha had accompanied her. The private car was now returning, bearing the man who had poetically declared to his fawning Board of Directors: "Our railroad is the magic wand that will make the desert bloom like the rose. We are embarked upon a project, gentlemen, so big, so vast, that it makes even your president feel a pulse of pride. This project is nothing more nor less than the opening of a region of waste country which an all-wise Creator has permitted to slumber for ages, for no less purpose than to reserve it to the horny-handed son of toil of our glorious country. It will awaken to the clarion call of our wealth, our brains, and our genius." He then mentioned Corrigan and the Midland grant—another reservation of Providence, which a credulous and asinine Congress had bestowed, in fee-simple, upon a certain *sauve* gentleman, named Marchmont—and disseminated such other details as a servile board of directors need know; and

then he concluded with a flowery peroration that left his hearers smirking fatuously.

And today J. Chalfant Benham was come to look upon the first fruits of his efforts.

As he stepped down from the private car he was greeted by vociferous cheers from a jostling and enthusiastic populace—for J. C. had very carefully wired the time of his arrival and Corrigan had acted accordingly, knowing J. C. well. J. C. was charmed—he said so, later, in a speech from a flimsy, temporary stand erected in the middle of the street in front of the *Plaza*—and in saying so he merely told the truth. For, next to money-making, adulation pleased him most. He would have been an able man had he ignored the latter passion. It seared his intellect as a pernicious habit blasts the character. It sat on his shoulders—extravagantly squared; it shone in his eyes—inviting inspection; his lips, curved with smug complacency, betrayed it as, sitting in Corrigan's office after the conclusion of the festivities, he smiled at the big man.

"Manti is a wonderful town—a *wonderful* town!" he declared. "It may be said that success is lurking just ahead. And much of the credit is due to your efforts," he added, generously.

Corrigan murmured a polite disclaimer, and plunged into dry details. J. C. had a passion for dry details. For many hours they sat in the office, their heads close together. Braman was occasionally called in. Judge Lindman was summoned after a time. J. C. shook the Judge's hand warmly and then resumed his chair, folding his chubby hands over his corpulent stomach.

"Judge Lindman," he said; "you thoroughly understand our position in this Midland affair."

The Judge glanced at Corrigan. "Thoroughly."

"No doubt there will be some contests. But the present claimants have no legal status. Mr. — (here J. C. mentioned a name that made the Judge's eyes brighten) tells me there will be no hitch. There could not be, of course. In the absence of any court record of possible transfers, the title to the land, of course, reverts to the Midland Company. As Mr. Corrigan has explained to me, he is entirely within his rights, having secured the title to the land from Mr. Marchmont, representing the Midland. You have no record of any transfers from the Midland to the present claimants or their predecessors, have you? There is no such record?"

The Judge saw Corrigan's amused grin, and surmised that J. C. was merely playing with him.

"No," he said, with some bitterness.

"Then of course you are going to stand with Mr. Corrigan against the present claimants?"

"I presume so."

"H'm," said J. C. "If there is any doubt about it, perhaps I had better remind you —"

The Judge groaned in agony of spirit. "It won't be necessary to remind me."

"So I thought. Well, gentlemen —" J. C. arose "—that will be all for this evening."

Thus he dismissed the Judge, who went to his cot behind a partition in the courthouse, while Corrigan and J. C. stepped outside and walked slowly toward

the private car. They lingered at the steps, and presently J. C. called and a negro came out with two chairs. J. C. and Corrigan draped themselves in the chairs and smoked. Dusk was settling over Manti; lights appeared in the windows of the buildings; a medley of noises reached the ears of the two men. By day Manti was lively enough, by night it was a maelstrom of frenzied action. A hundred cow-ponies were hitched to rails that skirted the street in front of store and saloon; cowboys from ranches, distant and near, rollicked from building to building, touching elbows with men less picturesquely garbed; the strains of crude music smote the flat, dead desert air; yells, shouts, laughter filtered through the bedlam; an engine, attached to a train of cars on the main track near the private car, wheezed steam in preparation for its eastward trip, soon to begin.

Benham had solemn thoughts, sitting there, watching.

"That crowd wouldn't have much respect for law. They're living at such a pitch that they'd lose their senses entirely if any sudden crisis should arise. I'd feel my way carefully, Corrigan—if I were you."

Corrigan laughed deeply. "Don't lose any sleep over it. There are fifty deputy marshals in that crowd—and they're heeled. The rear room in the bank building is a young arsenal."

Benham started. "How on earth—" he began.

"Law and order," smiled Corrigan. "A telegram did it. The territory wants a reputation for safety."

"By the way," said Benham, after a silence; "I *had* to take that Trevison affair out of your hands. We

don't want to antagonize the man. He will be valuable to us — later."

"How?"

"Carrington, the engineer I sent out here to look over the country before we started work, did considerable nosing around Trevison's land while in the vicinity. He told me there were unmistakable signs of coal of a good quality and enormous quantity. We ought to be able to drive a good bargain with Trevison one of these days—if we handle him carefully."

Corrigan frowned and grunted. "His land is included in that of the Midland grant. He shall be treated like the others. If that is your only objection—"

"It isn't," said Benham. "I have discovered that 'Brand' Trevison is really Trevison Brandon, the disgraced son of Orrin Brandon, the millionaire."

The darkness hid Corrigan's ugly pout. "How did you discover that?" he said, coolly, after a little.

"My daughter mentioned it in one of her letters to me. I confirmed, by quizzing Brandon, senior. Brandon is powerful and obstinate. If he should discover what our game is he would fight us to the last ditch. The whole thing would go to smash, perhaps."

"You didn't tell him about his son being out here?"

"Certainly not!"

"Good!"

"What do you mean?"

"That it's my land; that I'm going to take it away from Trevison, father or no father. I'm going to break him. That's what I mean!" Corrigan's big

hands were clenched on the arms of his chair; his eyes gleamed balefully in the semi-darkness. J. C. felt a tremor of awed admiration for him. He laughed, nervously. "Well," he said, "if you think you can handle it—"

They sat there for a long time, smoking in silence. One thought dominated Corrigan's mind: "Three weeks, and exchanging confidences—damn him!"

A discordant note floated out of the medley of sound in palpitating Manti, sailed over the ridiculous sky line and smote the ears of the two on the platform. The air rocked an instant later with a cheer, loud, pregnant with enthusiasm. And then a mass of men, close-packed, undulating, moved down the street toward the private car.

Benham's face whitened and he rose from his chair. "Good God!" he said; "what's happened?" He felt Corrigan's hand on his shoulder, forcing him back into his chair.

"It can't concern us," said the big man; "wait; we'll know pretty soon. Something's broke loose."

The two men watched—Benham breathless, wide-eyed; Corrigan with close-set lips and out-thrust chin. The mass moved fast. It passed the *Plaza*, far up the street, receiving additions each second as men burst out of doors and dove to the fringe; and grew in front as other men skittered into it, hanging to its edge and adding to the confusion. But Corrigan noted that the mass had a point, like a wedge, made by three men who seemed to lead it. Something familiar in the stat-

ure and carriage of one of the men struck Corrigan, and he strained his eyes into the darkness the better to see. He could be sure of the identity of the man, presently, and he set his jaws tighter and continued to watch, with bitter malignance in his gaze, for the man was Trevison. There was no mistaking the broad shoulders, the set of the head, the big, bold and confident poise of the man. At the point of the wedge he looked what he was—the leader; he dominated the crowd; it became plain to Corrigan as the mass moved closer that he was intent on something that had aroused the enthusiasm of his followers, for there were shouts of: "That's the stuff! Give it to them! Run 'em out!"

For an instant as the crowd passed the *Elk* saloon, its lights revealing faces in its glare, Corrigan thought its destination was the private car, and his hand went to his hip. It was withdrawn an instant later, though, when the leader swerved and marched toward the train on the main track. In the light also, Corrigan saw something that gave him a hint of the significance of it all. His laugh broke the tension of the moment.

"It's Denver Ed and Poker Charley," he said to Benham. "It's likely they've been caught cheating and have been invited to make themselves scarce." And he laughed again, with slight contempt, at Benham's sigh of relief.

The mass surged around the rear coach of the train. There was some laughter, mingled with jeers, and while this was at its height a man broke from the mass and walked rapidly toward Corrigan and Benham. It was Braman. Corrigan questioned him.

"It's two professional gamblers. They've been fleecing Manti's easy marks with great facility. Tonight they had Clay Levins in the back room of the *Belmont*. He had about a thousand dollars (the banker looked at Corrigan and closed an eye), and they took it away from him. It looked square, and Levins didn't kick. Couldn't anyway—he's iying in the back room of the *Belmont* now, paralyzed. I think that somebody told Levins' wife about him shooting Marchmont yesterday, and Mrs. Levins likely sent Trevison after hubby—knowing hubby's appetite for booze. Levins isn't giving the woman a square deal, so far as that is concerned," went on the banker; "she and the kids are in want half the time, and I've heard that Trevison's helped them out on quite a good many occasions. Anyway, Trevison appeared in town this afternoon, looking for Levins. Before he found him he heard these two beauties framing up on him. That's the result—the two beauties go out. The crowd was for stringing them up, but Trevison wouldn't have it."

"Marchmont?" interrupted Benham. "It isn't possible—"

"Why not?" grinned Corrigan. "Yes, sir, the former president of the Midland Company was shot to death yesterday for pocket-picking."

"Lord!" said Benham.

"So Levins' wife sent Trevison for hubby," said Corrigan, quietly. "She's *that* thick with Trevison, is she?"

"Get that out of your mind, Jeff," returned the banker, noting Corrigan's tone. "Everybody that

knows of the case will tell you that everything's straight there."

"Well," Corrigan laughed, "I'm glad to hear it."

The train steamed away as they talked, and the crowd began to break up and scatter toward the saloons. Before that happened, however, there was a great jam around Trevison; he was shaking hands right and left. Voices shouted that he was "all there!" As he started away he was forced to shove his way through the press around him.

Benham had been watching closely this evidence of Trevison's popularity; he linked it with some words that his daughter had written to him regarding the man, and as a thought formed in his mind he spoke it.

"I'd reconsider about hooking up with that man Trevison, Corrigan. He's one of those fellows that win popularity easily, and it won't do you any good to antagonize him."

"That's all right," laughed Corrigan, coldly.

CHAPTER XI

FOR THE "KIDDIES"

TREVISON dropped from Nigger at the dooryard of Levins' cabin, and looked with a grim smile at Levins himself lying face downward across the saddle on his own pony. He had carried Levins out of the *Belmont* and had thrown him, as he would have thrown a sack of meal, across the saddle, where he had lain during the four-mile ride, except during two short intervals in which Trevison had lifted him off and laid him flat on the ground, to rest. Trevison had meditated, not without a certain wry humor, upon the strength and the protracted potency of Manti's whiskey, for not once during his home-coming had Levins shown the slightest sign of returning consciousness. He was as slack as a meal sack now, as Trevison lifted him from the pony's back and let him slip gently to the ground at his feet. A few minutes later, Trevison was standing in the doorway of the cabin, his burden over his shoulder, the weak glare of light from within the cabin stabbing the blackness of the night and revealing him to the white-faced woman who had answered his summons.

Her astonishment had been of the mute, agonized kind; her eyes, hollow, eloquent with unspoken misery and resignation, would have told Trevison that this

was not the first time, had he not known from personal observation. She stood watching, gulping, shame and mortification bringing patches of color into her cheeks, as Trevison carried Levins into a bedroom and laid him down, removing his boots. She was standing near the door when Trevison came out of the bedroom; she was facing the blackness of the desert night — a blacker future, unknowingly — and Trevison halted on the threshold of the bedroom door and set his teeth in sympathy. For the woman deserved better treatment. He had known her for several years — since the time when Levins, working for him, had brought her from a ranch on the other side of the Divide, announcing their marriage. It had been a different Levins, then, as it was a different wife who stood at the door now. She had faded; the inevitable metamorphosis wrought by neglect, worry and want, had left its husks — a wan, tired-looking woman of thirty who had only her hopes to nourish her soul. There were children, too — if that were any consolation. Trevison saw them as he glanced around the cabin. They were in another bed; through an archway he could see their chubby faces. His lungs filled and his lips straightened.

But he grinned presently, in an effort to bring cheer into the cabin, reaching into a pocket and bringing out the money he had recovered for Levins.

"There are nearly a thousand dollars here. Two tin-horn gamblers tried to take it from Clay, but I headed them off. Tell Clay —"

Mrs. Levins' face whitened; it was more money than she had ever seen at one time.

"Clay's?" she interrupted, perplexedly. "Why, where —"

"I haven't the slightest idea—but he had it, they tried to take it away from him—it's here now—it belongs to you." He shoved it into her hands and stepped back, smiling at the stark wonder and joy in her eyes. He saw the joy vanish—concern and haunting worry came into her eyes.

"They told me that Clay shot—killed—a man yesterday. Is it true?" She cast a fearing look at the bed where the children lay.

"The damned fools!"

"Then it's true!" She covered her face with her hands, the money in them. Then she took the hands away and looked at the money in them, loathingly. "Do you think Clay —"

"No!" he said shortly, anticipating. "That couldn't be. For the man Clay killed had this money on him. Clay accused him of picking his pocket. Clay gave the bartender in the *Plaza* the number of each bill before he saw them after taking the bills out of the pickpocket's clothing. So it can't be as you feared."

She murmured incoherently and pressed both hands to her breast. He laughed and walked to the door.

"Well, you need it, you and the kiddies. I'm glad to have been of some service to you. Tell Clay he owes me something for cartage. If there is anything I can do for you and Clay and the kiddies I'd be only too glad."

"Nothing—now," said the woman, gratitude shining from her eyes, mingling with a worried gleam.

"Oh!" she added, passionately; "if Clay was only different! Can't you help him to be strong, Mr. Trevison? Like you? Can't you be with him more, to try to keep him straight for the sake of the children?"

"Clay's odd, lately," Trevison frowned. "He seems to have changed a lot. I'll do what I can, of course." He stepped out of the door and then looked back, calling: "I'll put Clay's pony away. Good night." And the darkness closed around him.

Over at Blakeley's ranch, J. C. Benham had just finished an inspection of the interior and had sank into the depths of a comfortable chair facing his daughter. Blakeley and his wife had retired, the deal that would place the ranch in possession of Benham having been closed. J. C. gazed critically at his daughter.

"Like it here, eh?" he said. "Well, you look it." He shook a finger at her. "Agatha has been writing to me rather often, lately," he added. There followed no answer and J. C. went on, narrowing his eyes at the girl. "She tells me that this fellow who calls himself 'Brand' Trevison has proven himself a — shall we say, persistent? — escort on your trips of inspection around the ranch."

Rosalind's face slowly crimsoned.

"H'm," said Benham.

"I thought Corrigan —" he began. The girl's eyes chilled.

"H'm," said Benham, again.

CHAPTER XII

EXPOSED TO THE SUNLIGHT

IT WAS a month before Trevison went to town again. Only once during that time did he see Rosalind Benham, for the Blakeleys had vacated, and goods and servants had arrived from the East and needed attention. Rosalind presided at the Bar B ranchhouse, under Agatha's chaperonage, and she had invited Trevison to visit her whenever the mood struck him. He had been in the mood many times, but had found no opportunity, for the various activities of range work claimed his attention. After a critical survey of Manti and vicinity, J. C. had climbed aboard his private car to be whisked to New York, where he reported to his Board of Directors that Manti would one day be one of the greatest commercial centers of the West.

Vague rumors of a legal tangle involving the land around Manti had reached Trevison's ears, and this morning he had jumped on Nigger, determined to run the rumors down. He made a wide swing, following the river, which took him miles from his own property and into the enormous basin which one day the engineers expected to convert into a mammoth lake from which the thirst of many dry acres of land was to be slaked; and halting Nigger near the mouth of the

gorge, watched the many laborers, directed by various grades of bosses, at work building the foundation of the dam. Later, he crossed the basin, followed the well-beaten trail up the slope to the level, and shortly he was in Hanrahan's saloon across the street from Braman's bank, listening to the plaint of Jim Lefingwell, the Circle Cross owner, whose ranch was east of town. Lefingwell was big, florid, and afflicted with perturbation that was almost painful. So exercised was he that he was at times almost incoherent.

"She's boomin', ain't she? Meanin' this man's town, of course. An' a man's got a right to cash in on a boom whenever he gits the chance. Well, I'd figgered to cash in. I ain't no hawg an' I got savvy enough to perceive without the aid of any damn fortune-teller that cattle is done in this country—considered as the main question. I've got a thousand acres of land—which I paid for in spot cash to Dick Kessler about eight years ago. If Dick was here he'd back me up in that. But he ain't here—the doggone fool went an' died about four years ago, leavin' me unprotected. Well, now, not digressin' any, I gits the idea that I'm goin' to unload consid'able of my thousand acres on the sufferin' fools that's yearnin' to come into this country an' work their heads off raisin' alfalfa an' hawgs, an' cab-bages an' sons with Pick-a-dilly collars to be eddicated East an' come back home some day an' lift the mortgage from the old homestead—which job they always falls down on—findin' it more to their likin' to mortgage their souls to buy jew'l'ry for fast wimmin. Well, not digressin' any, I run a-foul of a guy last week which

was dead set on investin' in ten acres of my land, skirtin' one of the irrigation ditches which they're figgerin' on puttin' in. The price I wanted was a heap satisfyin' to the guy. But he suggests that before he forks over the coin we go down to the courthouse an' muss up the records to see if my title is clear. Well, not digressin' any, she ain't! She ain't even nowheres clear a-tall—she ain't even there! She's wiped off, slick an' clean! There ain't a damned line to show that I ever bought my land from Dick Kessler, an' there ain't nothin' on no record to show that Dick Kessler ever owned it! What in hell do you think of that?

"Now, not digressin' any," he went on as Trevison essayed to speak; "that ain't the worst of it. While I was in there, talkin' to Judge Lindman, this here big guy that you fit with—Corrigan—comes in. I gathers from the trend of his remarks that I never had a legal title to my land—that it belongs to the guy which bought it from the Midland Company—which is him. Now what in hell do you think of that?"

"I knew Dick Kessler," said Trevison, soberly. "He was honest."

"Square as a dollar!" violently affirmed Lefingwell.

"It's too bad," sympathized Trevison. "That places you in a mighty bad fix. If there's anything I can do for you, why—"

"Mr. 'Brand' Trevison?" said a voice at Trevison's elbow. Trevison turned, to see a short, heavily built man smiling mildly at him.

"I'm a deputy from Judge Lindman's court," announced the man. "I've got a summons for you. Saw

you coming in here — saves me a trip to your place." He shoved a paper into Trevison's hands, grinned, and went out. For an instant Trevison stood, looking after the man, wondering how, since the man was a stranger to him, he had recognized him — and then he opened the paper to discover that he was ordered to appear before Judge Lindman the following day to show cause why he should not be evicted from certain described property held unlawfully by him. The name, Jefferson Corrigan, appeared as plaintiff in the action.

Lefingwell was watching Trevison's face closely, and when he saw it whiten, he muttered, understandingly:

"You've got it, too, eh?"

"Yes." Trevison shoved the paper into a pocket. "Looks like you're not going to be skinned alone, Lefingwell. Well, so-long; I'll see you later."

He strode out, leaving Lefingwell slightly stunned over his abrupt leave-taking. A minute later he was in the squatty frame courthouse, towering above Judge Lindman, who had been seated at his desk and who had risen at his entrance.

Trevison shoved the summons under Lindman's nose.

"I just got this," he said. "What does it mean?"

"It is perfectly understandable," the Judge smiled with forced affability. "The plaintiff, Mr. Jefferson Corrigan, is a claimant to the title of the land now held by you."

"Corrigan can have no claim on my land; I bought it five years ago from old Buck Peters. He got it from a man named Taylor. Corrigan is bluffing."

The Judge coughed and dropped his gaze from the

belligerent eyes of the young man. "That will be determined in court," he said. "The entire land transactions in this county, covering a period of twenty-five years, are recorded in that book." And the Judge indicated a ledger on his desk.

"I'll take a look at it." Trevison reached for the ledger, seized it, the Judge protesting, half-heartedly, though with the judicial dignity that had become habitual from long service in his profession.

"This is a high-handed proceeding, young man. You are in contempt of court!" The Judge tried, but could not make his voice ring sincerely. It seemed to him that this vigorous, clear-eyed young man could see the guilt that he was trying to hide.

Trevison laughed grimly, holding the Judge off with one hand while he searched the pages of the book, leaning over the desk. He presently closed the book with a bang and faced the Judge, breathing heavily, his muscles rigid, his eyes cold and glittering.

"There's trickery here!" He took the ledger up and slammed it down on the desk again, his voice vibrating. "Judge Lindman, this isn't a true record—it is not the original record! I saw the original record five years ago, when I went personally to Dry Bottom with Buck Peters to have my deed recorded! This record is a fake—it has been substituted for the original! I demand that you stay proceedings in this matter until a search can be made for the original record!"

"This is the original record." Again the Judge tried to make his voice ring sincerely, and again he failed. His one mistake had not hardened him and judicial dig-

nity could not help him to conceal his guilty knowledge. He winced as he felt Trevison's burning gaze on him, and could not meet the young man's eyes, boring like metal points into his consciousness. Trevison sprang forward and seized him by the shoulders.

"By God—you know it isn't the original!"

The Judge succeeded in meeting Trevison's eyes, but his age, his vacillating will, his guilt, could not combat the overpowering force and virility of this volcanic youth, and his gaze shifted and fell.

He heard Trevison catch his breath—shrilling it into his lungs in one great sob—and then he stood, white and shaking, beside the desk, looking at Trevison as the young man went out of the door—a laugh on his lips, mirthless, bitter, portending trouble and violence.

Corrigan was sitting at his desk in the bank building when Trevison entered the front door. The big man seemed to have been expecting his visitor, for just before the latter appeared at the door Corrigan took a pistol from a pocket and laid it on the desk beside him, placing a sheet of paper over it. He swung slowly around and faced Trevison, cold interest in his gaze. He nodded shortly as Trevison's eyes met his.

In a dozen long strides Trevison was at his side. The young man was pale, his lips were set, he was breathing fast, his nostrils were dilated—he was at that pitch of excitement in which a word, a look or a movement brings on action, instantaneous, unrecking of consequences. But he exercised repression that made

the atmosphere of the room tingle with tension of the sort that precedes the clash of mighty forces—he deliberately sat on one corner of Corrigan's desk, one leg dangling, the other resting on the floor, one hand resting on the idle leg, his body bent, his shoulders drooping a little forward. His voice was dry and light—Patrick Carson would have said his grin was tiger-like.

"So that's the kind of a whelp you are!" he said.

Corrigan caught his breath; his hands clenched, his face reddened darkly. He shot a quick glance at the sheet of paper under which he had placed the pistol. Trevison interpreted it, brushed the paper aside, disclosing the weapon. His lips curled; he took the pistol, "broke" it, tossed cartridges and weapon into a corner of the desk and laughed lowly.

"So you were expecting me," he said. "Well, I'm here. You want my land, eh?"

"I want the land that I'm entitled to under the terms of my purchase—the original Midland grant, consisting of one-hundred thousand acres. It belongs to me, and I mean to have it!"

"You're a liar, Corrigan," said the young man, holding the other's gaze coldly; "you're a lying, sneaking crook. You have no claim to the land, and you know it!"

Corrigan smiled stiffly. "The record of the deal I made with Jim Marchmont years before any of you people usurped the property is in my pocket at this minute. The court, here, will uphold it."

Trevison narrowed his eyes at the big man and

laughed, bitter humor in the sound. It was as though he had laughed to keep his rage from leaping, naked and murderous, into this discussion.

"It takes nerve, Corrigan, to do what you are attempting; it does, by Heaven—sheer, brazen gall! It's been done, though, by little, pettifogging shysters, by piking real-estate crooks—thousands of parcels of property scattered all over the United States have been filched in that manner. But a hundred-thousand acres! It's the biggest steal that ever has been attempted, to my knowledge, short of a Government grab, and your imagination does you credit. It's easy to see what's been done. You've got a fake title from Marchmont, antedating ours; you've got a crooked judge here, to befuddle the thing with legal technicalities; you've got the money, the power, the greed, and the cold-blooded determination. But I don't think you understand what you're up against—do you? Nearly every man who owns this land that you want has worked hard for it. It's been bought with work, man—work and lonesomeness and blood—and souls. And now you want to sweep it all away with one stroke. You want to step in here and reap the benefit; you want to send us out of here, beggars." His voice leaped from its repression; it now betrayed the passion that was consuming him; it came through his teeth: "You can't hand me that sort of a raw deal, Corrigan, and make me like it. Understand that, right now. You're bucking the wrong man. You can drag the courts into it; you can wriggle around a thousand legal corners, but damn you, you can't avert what's bound to come if you don't lay

off this deal, and that's a fight!" He laughed, full-throated, his voice vibrating from the strength of the passion that blazed in his eyes. He revealed, for an instant to Corrigan the wild, reckless untamed youth that knew no law save his own impulses, and the big man's eyes widened with the revelation, though he gave no other sign. He leaned back in his chair, smiling coldly, idly flecking a bit of ash from his shirt where it had fallen from his cigar.

"I am prepared for a fight. You'll get plenty of it before you're through—if you don't lie down and be good." There was malice in his look, complacent consciousness of his power. More, there was an impulse to reveal to this young man whom he intended to ruin, at least one of the motives that was driving him. He yielded to the impulse.

"I'm going to tell you something. I think I would have let you out of this deal, if you hadn't been so fresh. But you made a grand-stand play before the girl I am going to marry. You showed off your horse to make a bid for her favor. You paraded before her window in the car to attract her attention. I saw you. You rode me down. You'll get no mercy. I'm going to break you. I'm going to send you back to your father, Brandon, senior, in worse condition than when you left, ten years ago." He sneered as Trevison started and stepped on the floor, rigid.

"How did you recognize me?" Curiosity had dulled the young man's passion; his tone was hoarse.

"How?" Corrigan laughed, mockingly. "Did you think you could repose any confidence in a woman you

have known only about a month? Did you think she wouldn't tell me—her promised husband? She has told me—everything that she succeeded in getting out of you. She is heart and soul with me in this deal. She is ambitious. Do you think she would hesitate to sacrifice a clod-hopper like you? She's very clever, Trevison; she's deep, and more than a match for you in wits. Fight, if you like, you'll get no sympathy there."

Trevison's faith in Miss Benham had received a shock; Corrigan's words had not killed it, however.

"You're a liar!" he said.

Corrigan flushed, but smiled icily. "How many people know that you have coal on your land, Trevison?"

He saw Trevison's hands clench, and he laughed in grim amusement. It pleased him to see his enemy writhe and squirm before him; the grimness came because of a mental picture, in his mind at this minute, of Trevison confiding in the girl. He looked up, the smile freezing on his lips, for within a foot of his chest was the muzzle of Trevison's pistol. He saw the trigger finger contracting; saw Trevison's free hand clenched, the muscles corded and knotted—he felt the breathless, strained, unreal calm that precedes tragedy, grim and swift. He slowly stiffened, but did not shrink an inch. It took him seconds to raise his gaze to Trevison's face, and then he caught his breath quickly and smiled with straight lips.

"No; you won't do it, Trevison," he said, slowly; "you're not that kind." He deliberately swung around in the chair and drew another cigar from a box on the desk top, lit it and leaned back, again facing the pistol.

Trevison restored the pistol to the holster, brushing a hand uncertainly over his eyes as though to clear his mental vision, for the shock that had come with the revelation of Miss Benham's duplicity had made his brain reel with a lust to kill. He laughed hollowly. His voice came cold and hard:

"You're right—it wouldn't do. It would be plain murder, and I'm not quite up to that. You know your men, don't you—you coyote's whelp! You know I'll fight fair. You'll do yours underhandedly. Get up! There's your gun! Load it! Let's see if you've got the nerve to face a gun, with one in your own hand!"

"I'll do my fighting in my own way." Corrigan's eyes kindled, but he did not move. Trevison made a gesture of contempt, and wheeled, to go. As he turned he caught a glimpse of a hand holding a pistol, as it vanished into a narrow crevice between a jamb and the door that led to the rear room. He drew his own weapon with a single movement, and swung around to Corrigan, his muscles tensed, his eyes alert and chill with menace.

"I'll bore you if you wink an eyelash!" he warned, in a whisper.

He leaped, with the words, to the door, lunging against it, sending it crashing back so that it smashed against the wall, overbalancing some boxes that reposed on a shelf and sending them clattering. He stood in the opening, braced for another leap, tall, big, his muscles swelling and rippling, recklessly eager. Against the partition, which was still swaying, his arms outstretched, a pistol in one hand, trying to crowd still

farther back to escape the searching glance of Trevison's eyes, was Braman.

He had overheard Trevison's tense whisper to Corrigan. The cold savagery in it had paralyzed him, and he gasped as Trevison's eyes found him, and the pistol that he tried to raise dangled futilely from his nerveless fingers. It thudded heavily upon the boards of the floor an instant later, a shriek of fear mingling with the sound as he went down in a heap from a vicious, deadening blow from Trevison's fist.

Trevison's leap upon Braman had been swift; he was back in the doorway instantly, looking at Corrigan, his eyes ablaze with rage, wild, reckless, bitter. He laughed—the sound of it brought a grayish pallor to Corrigan's face.

"That explains your nerve!" he taunted. "It's a frame-up. You sent the deputy after me—pointed me out when I went into Hanrahan's! That's how he knew me! You knew I'd come in here to have it out with you, and you figured to have Braman shoot me when my back was turned! Ha, ha!" He swung his pistol on Corrigan; the big man gripped the arms of his chair and sat rigid, staring, motionless. For an instant there was no sound. And then Trevison laughed again.

"Bah!" he said; "I can't use your methods! You're safe so long as you don't move." He laughed again as he looked down at the banker. Reaching down, he grasped the inert man by the scruff of the neck and dragged him through the door, out into the banking room, past Corrigan, who watched him wonderingly, and to the front, there he dropped him and turning,

answered the question that he saw shining in Corrigan's eyes:

"I don't work in the dark! We'll take this case out into the sunlight, so the whole town can have a look at it!"

He stooped swiftly, grasped Braman around the middle, swung him aloft and hurled him through the window, into the street, the glass, shattered, clashing and jangling around him. He turned to Corrigan, laughing lowly:

"Get up. Manti will want to know. I'm going to do the talking!"

He forced Corrigan to the front door, and stood on the threshold behind him, silent, watching.

A hundred doorways were vomiting men. The crash of glass had carried far, and visions of a bank robbery filled many brains as their owners raced toward the doorway where Trevison stood, the muzzle of his pistol jammed firmly against Corrigan's back.

The crowd gathered, in the manner peculiar to such scenes, coming from all directions and converging at one point, massing densely in front of the bank building, surrounding the fallen banker, pushing, jostling, straining, craning necks for better views, eager-voiced, curious.

No one touched Braman. On the contrary, there were many in the front fringe that braced their bodies against the crush, shoving backward, crying that a man was hurt and needed breathing space. They were unheeded, and when the banker presently recovered consciousness he was lifted to his feet and stood, pressed

close to the building, swaying dizzily, pale, weak and shaken.

Word had gone through the crowd that it was not a robbery, for there were many there who knew Trevison; they shouted greetings to him, and he answered them, standing back of Corrigan, grim and somber.

Foremost in the crowd was Mullarky, who on another day had seen a fight at this same spot. He had taken a stand directly in front of the door of the bank, and had been using his eyes and his wits rapidly since his coming. And when two or three men from the crowd edged forward and tried to push their way to Corrigan, Mullarky drew a pistol, leaped to the door landing beside Trevison and trained his weapon on them.

"Stand back, or I'll plug you, sure as I'm a foot high! There's hell to pay here, an' me friend gets a square deal—whatever he's done!"

"Right!" came other voices from various points in the crowd; "a square deal—no interference!"

Judge Lindman came out into the street, urged by curiosity. He had stepped down from the doorway of the courthouse and had instantly been carried with the crowd to a point directly in front of Corrigan and Trevison, where he stood, bare-headed, pale, watching silently. Corrigan saw him, and smiled faintly at him. The easterner's eye sought out several faces in the crowd near him, and when he finally caught the gaze of a certain individual who had been eyeing him inquiringly for some moments, he slowly closed an eye and moved his head slightly toward the rear of the build-

ing. Instantly the man whistled shrilly with his fingers, as though to summon someone far down the street, and slipping around the edge of the crowd made his way around to the rear of the bank building, where he was joined presently by other men, roughly garbed, who carried pistols. One of them climbed in through a window, opened the door, and the others—numbering now twenty-five or thirty, dove into the room.

Out in front a silence had fallen. Trevison had lifted a hand and the crowd strained its ears to hear.

“I’ve caught a crook!” declared Trevison, the frenzy of fight still surging through his veins. “He’s not a cheap crook—I give him credit for that. All he wants to do is to steal the whole county. He’ll do it, too, if we don’t head him off. I’ll tell you more about him in a minute. There’s another of his stripe.” He pointed to Braman, who cringed. “I threw him out through the window, where the sunlight could shine on him. He tried to shoot me in the back—the big crook here, framed up on me. I want you all to know what you’re up against. They’re after all the land in this section; they’ve clouded every title. It’s a raw, dirty deal. I see now, why they haven’t sold a foot of the land they own here; why they’ve shoved the cost of leases up until it’s ruination to pay them. They’re land thieves, commercial pirates. They’re going to euchre everybody out of—”

Trevison caught a gasp from the crowd—concerted, sudden. He saw the mass sway in unison, stiffen, stand rigid; and he turned his head quickly, to see the door behind him, and the broken window through which he

had thrown Braman—the break running the entire width of the building—filled with men armed with rifles.

He divined the situation, sensed his danger—the danger that faced the crowd should one of its members make a hostile movement.

"Steady there, boys!" he shouted. "Don't start anything. These men are here through prearrangement—it's another frame-up. Keep your guns out of sight!" He turned, to see Corrigan grinning contemptuously at him. He met the look with naked exultation and triumph.

"Got your body-guard within call, eh?" he jeered. "You need one. You've cut me short, all right; but I've said enough to start a fire that will rage through this part of the country until every damned thief is burned out! You've selected the wrong man for a victim, Corrigan."

He stepped down into the street, sheathing his pistol. He heard Corrigan's voice, calling after him, saying:

"Grand-stand play again!"

Trevison turned; the gaze of the two men met, held, their hatred glowing bitter in their eyes; the gaze broke, like two sharp blades rasping apart, and Corrigan turned to his deputies, scowling; while Trevison pushed his way through the crowd.

Five minutes later, while Corrigan was talking with the deputies and Braman in the rear room of the bank building, Trevison was standing in the courthouse talking with Judge Lindman. The Judge stared out into

the street at some members of the crowd that still lingered.

"This town will be a volcano of lawlessness if it doesn't get a square deal from you, Lindman," said Trevison. "You have seen what a mob looks like. You're the representative of justice here, and if we don't get justice we'll come and hang you in spite of a thousand deputies! Remember that!"

He stalked out, leaving behind him a white-faced, trembling old man who was facing a crisis which made the future look very black and dismal. He was wondering if, after all, hanging wouldn't be better than the sunlight shining on a deed which each day he regretted more than on the preceding day. And Trevison, riding Nigger out of town, was estimating the probable effect of his crowd-drawing action upon Judge Lindman, and considering bitterly the perfidy of the woman who had cleverly drawn him on, to betray him.

CHAPTER XIII

ANOTHER LETTER

THAT afternoon, Corrigan rode to the Bar B. The ranchhouse was of the better class, big, imposing, well-kept, with a wide, roofed porch running across the front and partly around both sides. It stood in a grove of fir-balsam and cottonwood, on a slight eminence, and could be seen for miles from the undulating trail that led to Manti. Corrigan arrived shortly after noon, to find Rosalind gone, for a ride, Agatha told him, after she had greeted him at the edge of the porch.

Agatha had not been pleased over Rosalind's rides with Trevison as a companion. She was loyal to her brother, and she did not admire the bold recklessness that shone so frankly and unmistakably in Trevison's eyes. Had she been Rosalind she would have preferred the big, sleek, well-groomed man of affairs who had called today. And because of her preference for Corrigan, she sat long on the porch with him and told him many things — things that darkened the big man's face. And when, as they were talking, Rosalind came, Agatha discreetly retired, leaving the two alone.

For a time after the coming of Rosalind, Corrigan sat in a big rocking chair, looking thoughtfully down

the Manti trail, listening to the girl talk of the country, picturing her on a distant day—not too distant, either, for he meant to press his suit—sitting beside him on the porch of another house that he meant to build when he had achieved his goal. These thoughts thrilled him as they had never thrilled him until the entrance of Trevison into his scheme of things. He had been sure of her then. And now the knowledge that he had a rival, filled him with a thousand emotions, the most disturbing of which was jealousy. The rage in him was deep and malignant as he coupled the mental pictures of his imagination with the material record of Rosalind's movements with his rival, as related by Agatha. It was not his way to procrastinate; he meant to exert every force at his command, quickly, resistlessly, to destroy Trevison, to blacken him and damn him, in the eyes of the girl who sat beside him. But he knew that in the girl's presence he must be wise and subtle.

"It's a great country, isn't it?" he said, his eyes on the broad reaches of plain, green-brown in the shimmering sunlight. "Look at it—almost as big as some of the Old-world states! It's a wonderful country. I feel like a feudal baron, with the destinies of an important principality in the clutch of my hand!"

"Yes; it must give one a feeling of great responsibility to know that one has an important part in the development of a section like this."

He laughed, deep in his throat, at the awe in her voice. "I ought to have seen its possibilities years ago—I should have been out here, preparing for this.

But when I bought the land I had no idea it would one day be so valuable."

"Bought it?"

"A hundred thousand acres of it. I got it very cheap." He told her about the Midland grant and his purchase from Marchmont.

"I never heard of that before!" she told him.

"It wasn't generally known. In fact, it was apparently generally considered that the land had been sold by the Midland Company to various people—in small parcels. Unscrupulous agents engineered the sales, I suppose. But the fact is that I made the purchase from the Midland Company years ago—largely as a personal favor to Jim Marchmont, who needed money badly. And a great many of the ranch-owners around here really have no title to their land, and will have to give it up."

She breathed deeply. "That will be a great disappointment to them, now that there exists the probability of a great advance in the value of the land."

"That was the owners' lookout. A purchaser should see that his deed is clear before closing a deal."

"What owners will be affected?" She spoke with a slight breathlessness.

"Many." He named some of them, leaving Trevison to the last, and then watching her furtively out of the corners of his eyes and noting, with straightened lips, the quick gasp she gave. She said nothing; she was thinking of the great light that had been in Trevison's eyes on the day he had told her of his ten years of exile; she could remember his words, they

had been vivid fixtures in her mind ever since: "I own five thousand acres, and about a thousand acres of it is the best coal land in the United States. I wouldn't sell it for love or money, for when your father gets his railroad running, I'm going to cash in on ten of the leanest and hardest and loneliest years that any man ever put in."

How hard it would be for him to give it all up; to acknowledge defeat, to feel those ten wasted years behind him, empty, unproductive; full of shattered hopes and dreams changed to nightmares! She sat, white of face, gripping the arms of her chair, feeling a great, throbbing sympathy for him.

"You will take it all?"

"He will still hold one hundred and sixty acres—the quarter-section granted him by the government, which he has undoubtedly proved on."

"Why—" she began, and paused, for to go further would be to inject her personal affairs into the conversation.

"Trevison is an evil in the country," he went on, speaking in a judicial manner, but watching her narrowly. "It is men like him who retard civilization. He opposes law and order—defies them. It is a shock, I know, to learn that the title to property that you have regarded as your own for years, is in jeopardy. But still, a man can play the man and not yield to lawless impulses."

"What has happened?" She spoke breathlessly, for something in Corrigan's voice warned her.

"Very little—from Trevison's viewpoint, I sup

pose," he laughed. "He came into my office this morning, after being served with a summons from Judge Lindman's court in regard to the title of his land, and tried to kill me. Failing in that, he knocked poor, inoffensive little Braman down—who had interfered in my behalf—and threw him bodily through the front window of the building, glass and all. It's lucky for him that Braman wasn't hurt. After that he tried to incite a riot, which Judge Lindman nipped in the bud by sending a number of deputies, armed with rifles, to the scene. It was a wonderful exhibition of outlawry. I was very sorry to have it happen, and any more such outbreaks will result in Trevison's being jailed—if not worse."

"My God!" she panted, in a whisper, and became lost in deep thought.

They sat for a time, without speaking. She studied the profile of the man and compared its reposeful strength with that of the man who had ridden with her many times since her coming to Blakeley's. The turbulent spirit of Trevison awed her now, frightened her—she feared for his future. But she pitied him; the sympathy that gripped her made icy shivers run over her.

"From what I understand, Trevison has always been a disturber," resumed Corrigan. "He disgraced himself at college, and afterwards—to such an extent that his father cut him off. He hasn't changed, apparently; he is still doing the same old tricks. He had some sort of a love affair before coming West, your father told me. God help the girl who marries him!"

The girl flushed at the last sentence; she replied to the preceding one:

"Yes. Hester Keyes threw him over, after he broke with his father."

She did not see Corrigan's eyes quicken, for she was wondering if, after all, Hester Keyes had not acted wisely in breaking with Trevison. Certainly, Hester had been in a position to know him better than some of those critics who had found fault with her for her action—herself, for instance. She sighed, for the memory of her ideal was dimming. A figure that represented violence and bloodshed had come in its place.

"Hester Keyes," said Corrigan, musingly. "Did she marry a fellow named Harvey—afterwards? Winslow Harvey, if I remember rightly. He died soon after?"

"Yes—do you know her?"

"Slightly." Corrigan laughed. "I knew her father. Well, well. So Trevison worshiped there, did he? Was he badly hurt—do you know?"

"I do not know."

"Well," said Corrigan, getting up, and speaking lightly, as though dismissing the subject from his mind; "I presume he was—and still is, for that matter. A person never forgets the first love." He smiled at her "Won't you go with me for a short ride?"

The ride was taken, but a disturbing question lingered in Rosalind's mind throughout, and would not be solved. Had Trevison forgotten Hester Keyes? Did he think of her as—as—well, as she, herself, sometimes thought of Trevison—as she thought of him now—

with a haunting tenderness that made his faults recede, as the shadows vanish before the sunshine?

What Corrigan thought was expressed in a satisfied chuckle, as later, he loped his horse toward Manti. That night he wrote a letter and sent it East. It was addressed to Mrs. Hester Harvey, and was subscribed: "Your old friend, Jeff."

CHAPTER XIV

A RUMBLE OF WAR

THE train that carried Corrigan's letter eastward bore, among its few other passengers, a young man with a jaw set like a steel trap, who leaned forward in his seat, gripping the back of the seat in front of him; an eager, smoldering light in his eyes, who rose at each stop the train made and glared belligerently and intolerantly at the coach ends, muttering guttural anathemas at the necessity for delays. The spirit of battle was personified in him; it sat on his squared shoulders; it was in the thrust of his chin, stuck out as though to receive blows, which his rippling muscles would be eager to return. Two other passengers in the coach watched him warily, and once, when he got up and walked to the front of the coach, opening the door and looking out, to let in the roar and whir and the clatter, one of the passengers remarked to the other: "That guy is in a temper where murder would come easy to him."

The train left Manti at nine o'clock in the evening. At midnight it pulled up at the little frame station in Dry Bottom and the young man leaped off and strode rapidly away into the darkness of the desert town. A little later, J. Blackstone Graney, attorney at law, and

former Judge of the United States District Court at Dry Bottom, heard a loud hammering on the door of his residence at the outskirts of town. He got up, with a grunt of resentment for all heavy-fisted fools abroad on midnight errands, and went downstairs to admit a grim-faced stranger who looked positively blood-thirsty to the Judge, under the nervous tension of his midnight awakening.

"I'm 'Brand' Trevison, owner of the Diamond K ranch, near Manti," said the stranger, with blunt sharpness that made the Judge blink. "I've a case on in the Manti court at ten o'clock tomorrow—today," he corrected. "They are going to try to swindle me out of my land, and I've got to have a lawyer—a real one. I could have got half a dozen in Manti—such as they are—but I want somebody who is wise in the law, and with the sort of honor that money and power can't blast—I want you!"

Judge Graney looked sharply at his visitor, and smiled. "You are evidently desperately harried. Sit down and tell me about your case." He waved to a chair and Trevison dropped into it, sitting on its edge. The Judge took another, and with the kerosene lamp between them on a table, Trevison related what had occurred during the previous morning in Manti. When he concluded, the Judge's face was serious.

"If what you say is true, it is a very awkward, not to say suspicious, situation. Being the only lawyer in Dry Bottom, until the coming of Judge Lindman, I have had occasion many times to consult the record you speak of, and if my memory serves me well, I

have noted several times—quite casually, of course, since I have never been directly concerned with the records of the land in your vicinity—that several transfers of title to the original Midland grant have been recorded. Your deed would show, of course, the date of your purchase from Buck Peters, and we shall, perhaps, be able to determine the authenticity of the present record in that manner. But if, as you believe, the records have been tampered with, we are facing a long, hard legal battle which may or may not result in an ultimate victory for us—depending upon the power behind the interests opposed to you.”

“I’ll fight them to the Supreme Court of the United States!” declared Trevison. “I’ll fight them with the law or without it!”

“I know it,” said Graney, with a shrewd glance at the other’s grim face. “But be careful not to do anything that will jeopardize your liberty. If those men are what you think they are, they would be only too glad to have you break some law that would give them an excuse to jail you. You couldn’t do much fighting then, you know.” He got up. “There’s a train out of here in about an hour—we’ll take it.”

About six o’clock that morning the two men stepped off the train at Manti. Graney went directly to a hotel, to wash and breakfast, while Trevison, a little tired and hollow-eyed from loss of sleep and excitement, and with a two days’ growth of beard on his face, which made him look worse than he actually felt, sought the livery stable where he had left Nigger the night before, mounted the animal and rode rapidly out of town

toward the Diamond K. He took a trail that led through the cut where on another morning he had startled the laborers by riding down the wall — Nigger eating up the ground with long, sure, swift strides — passing Pat Carson and his men at a point on the level about a quarter of a mile beyond the cut. He waved a hand to Carson as he flashed by, and something in his manner caused Carson to remark to the engineer of the dinky engine: "Somethin's up wid Trevison ag'in, Murph—he's got a domned mean look in his eye. I'm the onluckiest son-av-a-gun in the worruld, Murph! First I miss seein' this fire-eater bate the face off the big ilephant, Corrigan, an' yisterday I was figgerin' on goin' to town—but didn't; an' I miss seein' that little whiffet of a Braman flyin' through the windy. Do ye's know that there's a feelin' ag'in Corrigan an' the railroad in town, an' thot this mon Trevison is the fuse that wud bust the boom av discontint. I'm beginnin' to feel a little excited meself. Now what do ye suppose that gang av min wid Winchesters was doin', comin' from thot direction this mornin'?" He pointed toward the trail that Trevison was riding. "An' that big stiff, Corrigan, wid thim!"

Trevison got the answer to this query the minute he reached the Diamond K ranchhouse. His foreman came running to him, pale, disgusted, his voice snapping like a whip:

"They've busted your desk an' rifled it. Twenty guys who said they was deputies from the court in Manti, an' Corrigan. I was here alone, watchin', as you told me, but couldn't move a finger — damn 'em!"

Trevison dismounted and ran into the house. The room that he used as an office was in a state of disorder. Papers, books, littered the floor. It was evident that a thorough search had been made—for something. Trevison darted to the desk and ran a hand into the pigeonhole in which he kept the deed which he had come for. The hand came out, empty. He sprang to the door of a small closet where, in a box that contained some ammunition that he kept for the use of his men, he had placed the money that Rosalind Benham had brought to him. The money was not there. He walked to the center of the room and stood for an instant, surveying the mass of litter around him, reeling, rage-drunken, murder in his heart. Barkwell, the foreman, watching him, drew great, long breaths of sympathy and excitement.

“Shall I get the boys an’ go after them damn sneaks?” he questioned, his voice tremulous. “We’ll clean ’em out—smoke ’em out of the county!” he threatened. He started for the door.

“Wait!” Trevison had conquered the first surge of passion; his grin was cold and bitter as he crossed glances with his foreman. “Don’t do anything—yet. I’m going to play the peace string out. If it doesn’t work, why then—” He tapped his pistol holster significantly.

“You get a few of the boys and stay here with them. It isn’t probable that they’ll try anything like that again, because they’ve got what they wanted. But if they happen to come again, hold them until I come. I’m going to court.”

Later, in Manti, he was sitting opposite Graney in a room in the hotel to which the Judge had gone.

"H'm," said the latter, compressing his lips; "that's sharp practice. They are not wasting any time."

"Was it legal?"

"The law is elastic—some judges stretch it more than others. A search-warrant and a writ of attachment probably did the business in this case. What I can't understand is why Judge Lindman issued the writ at all—if he did so. You are the defendant, and you certainly would have brought the deed into court as a means of proving your case."

Trevison had mentioned the missing money, though he did not think it important to explain where it had come from. And Judge Graney did not ask him. But when court opened at the appointed time, with a dignity which was a mockery to Trevison, and Judge Graney had explained that he had come to represent the defendant in the action, he mildly inquired the reason for the forcible entry into his client's house, explaining also that since the defendant was required to prove his case it was optional with him whether or not the deed be brought into court at all.

Corrigan had been on time; he had nodded curtly to Trevison when he had entered to take the chair in which he now sat, and had smiled when Trevison had deliberately turned his back. He smiled when Judge Graney asked the question—a faint, evanescent smirk. But at Judge Lindman's reply he sat staring stolidly, his face an impenetrable mask:

"There was no mention of a deed in the writ of

attachment issued by the court. Nor has the court any knowledge of the existence of such a deed. The officers of the court were commanded to proceed to the defendant's house, for the purpose of finding, if possible, and delivering to this court the sum of twenty-seven hundred dollars, which amount, representing the money paid to the defendant by the railroad company for certain grants and privileges, is to remain in possession of the court until the title to the land in litigation has been legally awarded."

"But the court officers seized the defendant's deed, also," objected Judge Graney.

Judge Lindman questioned a deputy who sat in the rear of the room. The latter replied that he had seen no deed. Yes, he admitted, in reply to a question of Judge Graney's, it might have been possible that Corrigan had been alone in the office for a time.

Graney looked inquiringly at Corrigan. The latter looked steadily back at him. "I saw no deed," he said, coolly. "In fact, it wouldn't be *possible* for me to see any deed, for Trevison has no title to the property he speaks of."

Judge Graney made a gesture of impotence to Trevison, then spoke slowly to the court. "I am afraid that without the deed it will be impossible for us to proceed. I ask a continuance until a search can be made."

Judge Lindman coughed. "I shall have to refuse the request. The plaintiff is anxious to take possession of his property, and as no reason has been shown why he should not be permitted to do so, I hereby return judgment in his favor. Court is dismissed."

"I give notice of appeal," said Graney.

Outside a little later Judge Graney looked gravely at Trevison. "There's knavery here, my boy; there's some sort of influence behind Lindman. Let's see some of the other owners who are likely to be affected."

This task took them two days, and resulted in the discovery that no other owner had secured a deed to his land. Lefingwell explained the omission.

"A sale is a sale," he said; "or a sale *has* been a sale until now. Land has changed hands out here just the same as we'd trade a horse for a cow or a pipe for a jack-knife. There was no questions asked. When a man had a piece of land to sell, he sold it, got his money an' didn't bother to give a receipt. Half the damn fools in this country wouldn't know a deed from a marriage license, an' they haven't been needin' one or the other. For when a man has a wife she's continually remindin' him of it, an' he can't forget it—he's got her. It's the same with his land—he's got it. So far as I know there's never been a deed issued for my land—or any of the land in that Midland grant, except Trevison's."

"It looks as though Corrigan had considered that phase of the matter," dryly observed Judge Graney. "The case doesn't look very hopeful. However, I shall take it before the Circuit Court of Appeals, in Santa Fe."

He was gone a week, and returned, disgusted, but determined.

"They denied our appeal; said they might have considered it if we had some evidence to offer showing

that we had some sort of a claim to the title. When I told them of my conviction that the records had been tampered with, they laughed at me." The Judge's eyes gleamed indignantly. "Sometimes, I feel heartily in sympathy with people who rail at the courts—their attitude is often positively asinine."

"Perhaps the long arm of power has reached to Santa Fe?" suggested Trevison.

"It won't reach to Washington," declared the Judge, decisively. "And if you say the word, I'll go there and see what I can do. It's an outrage!"

"I was hoping you'd go—there's no limit," said Trevison. "But as I see the situation, everything depends upon the discovery of the original record. I'm convinced that it is still in existence, and that Judge Lindman knows where it is. I'm going to get it, or—"

"Easy, my friend," cautioned the Judge. "I know how you feel. But you can't fight the law with lawlessness. You lie quiet until you hear from me. That is all there is to be done, anyway—win or lose."

Trevison clenched his teeth. "I might feel that way about it, if I had been as careless of my interests as the other owners here, but I safeguarded my interests, trusted them to the regularly recognized law out here, and I'm going to fight for them! Why, good God, man; I've worked ten years for that land! Do you think I will see it go *without* a fight?" He laughed, and the Judge shook his head at the sound.

CHAPTER XV

A MUTUAL BENEFIT ASSOCIATION

UNHEEDING the drama that was rapidly and invisibly (except for the incident of Braman and the window) working itself out in its midst, Manti lunged forward on the path of progress, each day growing larger, busier, more noisy and more important. Perhaps Manti did not heed, because Manti was itself a drama—the drama of creation. Each resident, each new-comer, settled quickly and firmly into the place that desire or ambition or greed urged him; put forth whatever energy nature had endowed him with, and pushed on toward the goal toward which the town was striving—success; collectively winning, unrecking of individual failure or tragedy—those things were to be expected, and they fell into the limbo of forgotten things, easily and unnoticed. Wrecks, disasters, were certain. They came—turmoil engulfed them.

Which is to say that during the two weeks that had elapsed since the departure of Judge Graney for Washington, Manti had paid very little attention to “Brand” Trevison while he haunted the telegraph station and the post-office for news. He was pointed out, it is true, as the man who had hurled banker Braman through the window of his bank building; there was

a hazy understanding that he was having some sort of trouble with Corrigan over some land titles, but in the main Manti buzzed along, busy with its visions and its troubles, leaving Trevison with his.

The inaction, with the imminence of failure after ten years of effort, had its effect on Trevison. It fretted him; he looked years older; he looked worried and harassed; he longed for a chance to come to grips in an encounter that would ease the strain. Physical action it must be, for his brain was a muddle of passion and hatred in which clear thoughts, schemes, plans, plots, were swallowed and lost. He wanted to come into physical contact with the men and things that were thwarting him; he wanted to feel the thud and jar of blows; to catch the hot breath of open antagonism; he yearned to feel the strain of muscles—this fighting in the dark with courts and laws and lawyers, according to rules and customs, filled him with a raging impotence that hurt him. And then, at the end of two weeks came a telegram from Judge Graney, saying merely: "Be patient. It's a long trail."

Trevison got on Nigger and returned to the Diamond K.

The six o'clock train arrived in Manti that evening with many passengers, among whom was a woman of twenty-eight at whom men turned to look the second time. Her traveling suit spoke eloquently of that personal quality which a language, seeking new and expressive phrases describes as "class." It fitted her smoothly, tightly, revealing certain lines of her graceful figure that made various citizens of Manti

gasp. "Looks like she'd been poured into it," remarked an interested loungeur. She lingered on the station platform until she saw her trunks safely deposited, and then, drawing her skirts as though fearful of contamination, she walked, self-possessed and cool, through the doorway of the *Castle* hotel — Manti's aristocrat of hostelryes.

Shortly afterwards she admitted Corrigan to her room. She had changed from her traveling suit to a gown of some soft, glossy material that accentuated the lines revealed by the discarded habit. The worldly-wise would have viewed the lady with a certain expressive smile that might have meant much or nothing. And the lady would have looked upon that smile as she now looked at Corrigan, with a faint defiance that had quite a little daring in it. But in the present case there was an added expression — two, in fact — pleasure and expectancy.

"Well — I'm here." She bowed, mockingly, laughingly, compressing her lips as she noted the quick fire that flamed in her visitor's eyes.

"That's all over, Jeff; I won't go back to it. If that's why —"

"That's all right," he said, smiling as he took the chair she waved him to; "I've erased a page or two from the past, myself. But I can't help admiring you; you certainly are looking fine! What have you been doing to yourself?"

She draped herself in a chair where she could look straight at him, and his compliment made her mouth harden at the corners.

"Well," she said; "in your letter you promised you'd take me into your confidence. I'm ready."

"It's purely a business proposition. Each realizes on his effort. You help me to get Rosalind Benham through the simple process of fascinating Trevison; I help you to get Trevison by getting Miss Benham. It's a sort of mutual benefit association, as it were."

"What does Trevison look like, Jeff—tell me?" The woman leaned forward in her chair, her eyes glowing.

"Oh, you women!" said Corrigan, with a gesture of disgust. "He's a handsome fool," he added; "if that's what you want to know. But I haven't any compliments to hand him regarding his manners—he's a wild man!"

"I'd love to see him!" breathed the woman.

"Well, keep your hair on; you'll see him soon enough. But you've got to understand this: He's on my land, and he gets off without further fighting—if you can hold him. That's understood, eh? You win him back and get him away from here. If you double-cross me, he finds out what you are!" He flung the words at her, roughly.

She spoke quietly, though color stained her cheeks. "Not 'are,' Jeff—what I was. That would be bad enough. But have no fear—I shall do as you ask. For I want him—I have wanted him all the time—even during the time I was chained to that little beast, Harvey. I wouldn't have been what I am—if—if —"

"Cut it out!" he advised brutally; "the man always

gets the blame, anyway—so it's no novelty to hear that sort of stuff. So you understand, eh? You choose your own method—but get results—quick! I want to get that damned fool away from here!" He got up and paced back and forth in the room. "If he takes Rosalind Benham away from me I'll kill him! I'll kill him, anyway!"

"Has it gone very far between them?" The concern in her voice brought a harsh laugh from Corrigan.

"Far enough, I guess. He's been riding with her every day for three weeks, her aunt told me. He's a fiery, impetuous devil!"

"Don't worry," she consoled. "And now," she directed; "get out of here. I've been on the go for days and days, and I want to sleep. I shall go out to see Rosalind tomorrow—to surprise her, Jeff—to surprise her. Ha, ha!"

"I'll have a rig here for you at nine o'clock," said Corrigan. "Take your trunks—she won't order you away. Tell her that Trevison sent for you—don't mention my name; and stick to it! Well, pleasant dreams," he added as he went out.

As the door closed the woman stood looking at it, a sneer curving her lips.

CHAPTER XVI

WHEREIN A WOMAN LIES

“AREN’T you going to welcome me, dearie?”
From the porch of the Bar B ranchhouse Rosalind had watched the rapid approach of the buckboard, and she now stood at the edge of the step leading to the porch, not more than ten or fifteen feet distant from the vehicle, shocked into dumb amazement.

“Why, yes—of course. That is— Why, what on earth brought you out here?”

“A perfectly good train—as far as your awfully crude town of Manti; and this—er—spring-legged thing, the rest of the way,” laughed Hester Harvey. She had stepped down, a trifle flushed, inwardly amused, outwardly embarrassed—which was very good acting; but looking very attractive and girlish in the simple dress she had donned for the occasion—and for the purpose of making a good impression. So attractive was she that the contemplation of her brought a sinking sensation to Rosalind that drooped her shoulders and caused her to look around, involuntarily, for something to lean upon. For there flashed into her mind at this instant the conviction that she had herself to blame for this visitation—she had written to Ruth Gresham, and Ruth very likely had disseminated the news, after

the manner of all secrets, and Hester had heard it. And of course the attraction was "Brand" Trevison! A new emotion surged through Rosalind at this thought, an emotion so strong that it made her gasp — jealousy!

She got through the ordeal somehow — with an appearance of pleasure — though it was hard for her to play the hypocrite! But so soon as she decently could, without cutting short the inevitable inconsequential chatter which fills the first moments of renewed friendships, she hurried Hester to a room and during her absence sat immovable in her chair on the porch staring stonily out at the plains.

It was not until half an hour later, when they were sitting on the porch, that Hester delivered the stroke that caused Rosalind's hands to fall nervelessly into her lap, her lips to quiver and her eyes to fill with a reflection of a pain that gripped her hard, somewhere inside. For Hester had devised her method, as suggested by Corrigan.

"It may seem odd to you — if you know anything of the manner of my breaking off with Trevison Brandon — but he wrote me about a month ago, asking me to come out here. I didn't accept the invitation at once — because I didn't want him to be too sure, you know, dearie. Men are always presuming and pursuing, dearie."

"Then you didn't hear of Trevison's whereabouts from Ruth Gresham?"

"Why, no, dearie! He wrote directly to me."

Rosalind hadn't *that* to reproach herself with, at any rate:

"Of course, I couldn't go to his ranch — the Diamond K, isn't it? — so, noting from one of the newspapers that you had come here, I decided to take advantage of *your* hospitality. I'm just wild to see the dear boy! Is his ranch far? For you know," she added, with a malicious look at the girl's pale face; "I must not keep him waiting, now that I am here."

"You won't find him prosperous." It hurt Rosalind to say that, but the hurt was slightly offset by a savage resentment that gripped her when she thought of how quickly Hester had thrown Trevison over when she had discovered that he was penniless. And she had a desperate hope that the dismal aspect of Trevison's future would appall Hester — as it would were the woman still the mercenary creature she had been ten years before. But Hester looked at her with grave imperturbability.

"I heard something about his trouble. About some land, isn't it? I didn't learn the particulars. Tell me about it — won't you, dearie?"

Rosalind's story of Trevison's difficulties did not have the effect that she anticipated.

"The poor, dear boy!" said Hester — and she seemed genuinely moved. Rosalind gulped hard over the shattered ruins of this last hope and got up, fighting against an inhospitable impulse to order Hester away. She made some slight excuse and slipped to her room, where she stayed long, elemental passions battling riotously within her.

She realized now how completely she had yielded to the spell that the magnetic and impetuous exile had

woven about her; she knew now that had he pressed her that day when he had told her of his love for her she must have surrendered. She thought, darkly, of his fiery manner that day, of his burning looks, his hot, impulsive words, of his confidences. Hypocrisy all! For while they had been together he must have been thinking of sending for Hester! He had been trifling with her! Faith in an ideal is a sacred thing, and shattered, it lights the fires of hate and scorn, and the emotions that seethed through Rosalind's veins as in her room she considered Trevison's unworthiness, finally developed into a furious vindictiveness. She wished dire, frightful calamities upon him, and then, swiftly reacting, her sympathetical womanliness forced the dark passions back, and she threw herself on the bed, sobbing, murmuring: "Forgive me!"

Later, when she had made herself presentable, she went downstairs again, concealing her misery behind a steady courtesy and a smile that sometimes was a little forced and bitter, to entertain her guest. It was a long, tiresome day, made almost unbearable by Hester's small talk. But she got through it. And when, rather late in the afternoon, Hester inquired the way to the Diamond K, announcing her intention of visiting Trevison immediately, she gave no evidence of the shocked surprise that seized her. She coolly helped Hester prepare for the trip, and when she drove away in the buckboard, stood on the ground at the edge of the porch, watching as the buckboard and its occupant faded into the shimmering haze of the plains.

CHAPTER XVII

JUSTICE VS. LAW

IMPATIENCE, intolerable and vicious, gripped Trevison as he rode homeward after his haunting vigil at Manti. The law seemed to him to be like a house with many doors, around and through which one could play hide and seek indefinitely, with no possibility of finding one of the doors locked. Judge Graney had warned him to be cautious, but as he rode into the dusk of the plains the spirit of rebellion seized him. Twice he halted Nigger and wheeled him, facing Manti, already agleam and tumultuous, almost yielding to his yearning to return and force his enemy to some sort of physical action, but each time he urged the horse on, for he could think of no definite plan. He was half way to the Diamond K when he suddenly started and sat rigid and erect in the saddle, drawing a deep breath, his nerves tingling from excitement. He laughed lowly, exultingly, as men laugh when under the stress of adversity they devise sudden, bold plans of action, and responding to the slight knee press Nigger turned, reared, and then shot like a black bolt across the plains at an angle that would not take him anywhere near the Diamond K.

Half an hour later, in a darkness which envied that

of the night on which he had carried the limp and drink-saturated Clay Levins to his wife, Trevison was dismounting at the door of the gun-man's cabin. A little later, standing in the glare of lamplight that shone through the open doorway, he was reassuring Mrs. Levins and asking for her husband. Shortly afterward, he was talking lowly to Levins as the latter saddled his pony out at the stable.

"I'll do it—for you," Levins told him. And then he chuckled. "It'll seem like old times."

"It's Justice versus Law, tonight," laughed Trevison; "it's a case of 'the end justifying the means.'"

Manti never slept. At two o'clock in the morning the lights in the gambling rooms of the *Belmont* and the *Plaza* were still flickering streams out into the desert night; weak strains of discord were being drummed out of a piano in a dance hall; the shuffling of feet smote the dead, flat silence of the night with an odd, weird resonance. Here and there a light burned in a dwelling or store, or shone through the wall of a tent-house. But Manti's one street was deserted—the only peace that Manti ever knew, had descended.

Two men who had dismounted at the edge of town had hitched their horses in the shadow of a wagon shed in the rear of a store building, and were making their way cautiously down the railroad tracks toward the center of town. They kept in the shadows of the buildings as much as possible—for space was valuable now and many buildings nuzzled the railroad tracks; but when once they were forced to pass through

a light from a window their faces were revealed in it for an instant — set, grim and determined.

“We’ve got to move quickly,” said one of the men as they neared the courthouse; “it will be daylight soon. Damn a town that never sleeps!”

The other laughed lowly. “I’ve said the same thing, often,” he whispered. “Easy now — here we are!”

They paused in the shadow of the building and whispered together briefly. A sound reached their ears as they stood. Peering around the corner nearest them they saw the bulk of a man appear. He walked almost to the corner of the building where they crouched, and they held their breath, tensing their muscles. Just when it seemed they must be discovered, the man wheeled, walked away, and vanished into the darkness toward the other side of the building. Presently he returned, and repeated the maneuver. As he vanished the second time, the larger man of the two in wait, whispered to the other:

“He’s the sentry! Stand where you are — I’ll show Corrigan —”

The words were cut short by the reappearance of the sentry. He came close to the corner, and wheeled, to return. A lithe black shape leaped like a huge cat, and landed heavily on the sentry’s shoulders, bringing a pained grunt from him. The grunt died in a gurgle as iron fingers closed on his throat; he was jammed, face down, into the dust and held there, smothering, until his body slacked and his muscles ceased rippling. Then a handkerchief was slipped around his mouth and drawn tightly. He was rolled over, still uncon-

scious, his hands tied behind him. Then he was borne away into the darkness by the big man, who carried him as though he were a child.

"Locked in a box-car," whispered the big man, returning: "They'll get him; they're half unloaded."

Without further words they returned to the shadow of the building.

Judge Lindman had not been able to sleep until long after his usual hour for retiring. The noise, and certain thoughts, troubled him. It was after midnight when he finally sought his cot, and he was in a heavy doze until shortly after two, when a breath of air, chilled by its clean sweep over the plains, searched him out and brought him up, sitting on the edge of the cot, shivering.

The rear door of the courthouse was open. In front of the iron safe at the rear of the room he saw a man, faintly but unmistakably outlined in the cross light from two windows. He was about to cry out when his throat was seized from behind and he was borne back on the cot resistlessly. Held thus, a voice which made him strain his eyes in an effort to see the owner's face, hissed in his ear:

"I don't want to kill you, but I'll do it if you cry out! I mean business! Do you promise not to betray us?"

The Judge wagged his head weakly, and the grip on his throat relaxed. He sat up, aware that the fingers were ready to grip his throat again, for he could feel the big shape lingering beside him.

"This is an outrage!" he gasped, shuddering. "I know you—you are Trevison. I shall have you punished for this."

The other laughed lowly and vibrantly. "That's your affair—if you dare! You say a word about this visit and I'll feed your scoundrelly old carcass to the coyotes! Justice is abroad tonight and it won't be balked. I'm after that original land record—and I'm going to have it. You know where it is—you've got it. Your face told me that the other day. You're only half-heartedly in this steal. Be a man—give me the record—and I'll stand by you until hell freezes over! Quick! Is it in the safe?"

The Judge wavered in agonized indecision. But thoughts of Corrigan's wrath finally conquered.

"It—it isn't in the safe," he said. And then, aware of his error because of the shrill breath the other drew, he added, quaveringly: "There is no—the original record is in my desk—you've seen it."

"Bah!" The big shape backed away—two or three feet, whispering back at the Judge. "Open your mouth and you're a dead man. I've got you covered!"

Cowering on his cot the Judge watched the big shape join the other at the safe. How long it remained there, he did not know. A step sounded in the silence that reigned outside—a third shape loomed in the doorway.

"Judge Lindman!" called a voice.

"Y-es?" quavered the Judge, aware that the big shape in the room was now close to him, menacing him.

"Your door's open! Where's Ed? There's some-

thing wrong! Get up and strike a light. There'll be hell to pay if Corrigan finds out we haven't been watching your stuff. Damn it! A man can't steal time for a drink without something happens. Jim and Bill and me just went across the street, leaving Ed here. They're coming right—"

He had been entering the room while talking, fingering in his pockets for a match. His voice died in a quick gasp as Trevison struck with the butt of his pistol. The man fell, silently.

Another voice sounded outside. Trevison crouched at the doorway. A form darkened the opening. Trevison struck, missed, a streak of fire split the night—the newcomer had used his pistol. It went off again—the flame-spurt shooting ceilingward, as Levins clinched the man from the rear. A third man loomed in the doorway; a fourth appeared, behind him. Trevison swung at the head of the man nearest him, driving him back upon the man behind, who cursed, plunging into the room. The man whom Levins had seized was shouting orders to the others. But these suddenly ceased as Levins smashed him on the head with the butt of a pistol. Two others remained. They were stubborn and courageous. But it was miserable work, in the dark—blows were misdirected, friend striking friend; other blows went wild, grunts of rage and impotent curses following. But Trevison and Levins were intent on escaping—a victory would have been hollow—for the thud and jar of their boots on the bare floor had been heard; doors were slamming; from across the street came the barking of a dog; men were

shouting questions at one another; from the box-car on the railroad tracks issued vociferous yells and curses. Trevison slipped out through the door, panting. His opponent had gone down, temporarily disabled from sundry vicious blows from a fist that had worked like a piston rod. A figure loomed at his side. "I got mine!" it said, triumphantly; "we'd better slope."

"Another five minutes and I'd have cracked it," breathed Levins as they ran. "What's Corrigan havin' the place watched for?"

"You've got me. Afraid of the Judge, maybe. The Judge hasn't his whole soul in this deal; it looks to me as though Corrigan is forcing him. But the Judge has the original record, all right; and it's in that safe, too! God! If they'd only given us a minute or two longer!"

They fled down the track, running heavily, for the work had been fast and the tension great, and when they reached the horses and threw themselves into the saddles, Manti was ablaze with light. As they raced away in the darkness a grim smile wreathed Trevison's face. For though he had not succeeded in this enterprise, he had at least struck a blow—and he had corroborated his previous opinion concerning Judge Lindman's knowledge of the whereabouts of the original record.

It was three o'clock and the dawn was just breaking when Trevison rode into the Diamond K corral and pulled the saddle from Nigger. Levins had gone home.

Trevison was disappointed. It had been a bold

scheme, and well planned, and it would have succeeded had it not been for the presence of the sentries. He had not anticipated that. He laughed grimly, remembering Judge Lindman's fright. Would the Judge reveal the identity of his early-morning visitor? Trevison thought not, for if the original record were in the safe, and if for any reason the Judge wished to conceal its existence from Corrigan, a hint of the identity of the early-morning visitors—especially of one—might arouse Corrigan's suspicions.

But what if Corrigan knew of the existence of the original record? There was the presence of the guards to indicate that he did. But there was Judge Lindman's half-heartedness to disprove that line of reasoning. Also, Trevison was convinced that if Corrigan knew of the existence of the record he would destroy it; it would be dangerous, in the hands of an enemy. But it would be an admirable weapon of self-protection in the hands of a man who had been forced into wrongdoing—in the hands of Judge Lindman, for instance. Trevison opened the door that led to his office, thrilling with a new hope. He lit a match, stepped across the floor and touched the flame to the wick of the kerosene lamp—for it was not yet light enough for him to see plainly in the office—and stood for an instant blinking in its glare. A second later he reeled back against the edge of the desk, his hands gripping it, dumb, amazed, physically sick with a fear that he had suddenly gone insane. For in a big chair in a corner of the room, sleepy-eyed, tired, but looking very becoming in her simple dress with a light cloak over it, the

collar turned up, so that it gave her an appearance of attractive negligence, a smile of delighted welcome on her face, was Hester Harvey.

She got up as he stood staring dumfoundedly at her and moved toward him, with an air of artful supplication that brought a gasp out of him—of sheer relief.

“Won’t you welcome me, Trev? I have come very far, to see you.” She held out her hands and went slowly toward him, mutely pleading, her eyes luminous with love—which she did not pretend, for the boy she had known had grown into the promise of his youth—big, magnetic—a figure for any woman to love.

He had been looking at her intently, narrowly, searchingly. He saw what she herself had not seen—the natural changes that ten years had brought to her. He saw other things—that she had not suspected—a certain blasé sophistication; a too bold and artful expression of the eyes—as though she knew their power and the lure of them; the slightly hard curve in the corners of her mouth; a second character lurking around her—indefinite, vague, repelling—the subconscious self, that no artifice can hide—the sin and the shame of deeds unrepented. If there had been a time when he had loved her, its potency could not leap the lapse of years and overcome his repugnance for her kind, and he looked at her coldly, barring her progress with a hand, which caught her two and held them in a grip that made her wince.

“What are you doing here? How did you get in? When did you come?” He fired the questions at her roughly, brutally.

"Why, Trev." She gulped, her smile fading palely. The conquest was not to be the easy one she had thought—though she really wanted him—more than ever, now that she saw she was in danger of losing him. She explained, earnestly pleading with eyes that had lost their power to charm him.

"I heard you were here—that you were in trouble. I want to help you. I got here night before last—to Manti. Rosalind Benham had written about you to Ruth Gresham—a friend of hers in New York. Ruth Gresham told me. I went directly from Manti to Benham's ranch. Then I came here—about dusk, last night. There was a man here—your foreman, he said. I explained, and he let me in. Trev—won't you welcome me?"

"It isn't the first time I've been in trouble." His laugh was harsh; it made her cringe and cry:

"I've repented for that. I shouldn't have done it; I don't know what was the matter with me. Harvey had been telling me things about you—"

"You wouldn't have believed him—" He laughed, cynically. "There's no use of haggling over *that*—it's buried, and I've placed a monument over it: 'Here lies a fool that believed in a woman.' I don't reproach you—you couldn't be blamed for not wanting to marry an idiot like me. But I haven't changed. I still have my crazy ideas of honor and justice and square-dealing, and my double-riveted faith in my ability to triumph over all adversity. But women—Bah! you're all alike! You scheme, you plot, you play for place; you are selfish, cold: you snivel and whine— There

is more of it, but I can't think of any more. But—let's face this matter squarely. If you still like me, I'm sorry for you, for I can't say that the sight of you has stirred any old passion in me. You shouldn't have come out here."

"You're terribly resentful, Trev. And I don't blame you a bit—I deserve it all. But don't send me away. Why, I—love you, Trev; I've loved you all these years; I loved you when I sent you away—while I was married to Harvey; and more afterwards—and now, deeper than ever; and—"

He shook his head and looked at her steadily—cynicism, bald derision in his gaze. "I'm sorry; but it can't be—you're too late."

He dropped her hands, and she felt of the fingers where he had gripped them. She veiled the quick, savage leap in her eyes by drooping the lids.

"You love Rosalind Benham," she said, quietly, looking at him with a mirthless smile. He started, and her lips grew a trifle stiff. "You poor boy!"

"Why the pity?" he said grimly.

"Because she doesn't care for you, Trev. She told me yesterday that she was engaged to marry a man named Corrigan. He is out here, she said. She remarked that she had found you very amusing during the three or four weeks of Corrigan's absence, and she seemed delighted because the court out here had ruled that the land you thought was yours belongs to the man who is to be her husband."

He stiffened at this, for it corroborated Corrigan's words: "She is heart and soul with me in this deal.

She is ambitious." Trevison's lips curled scornfully. First, Hester Keyes had been ambitious, and now it was Rosalind Benham. He fought off the bitter resentment that filled him and raised his head, laughing, glossing over the hurt with savage humor.

"Well, I'm doing some good in the world, after all."

"Trev," Hester moved toward him again, "don't talk like that—it makes me shiver. I've been through the fire, boy—we've both been through it. I wasted myself on Harvey—you'll do the same with Rosalind Benham. Ten years, boy—think of it! I've loved you for that long. Doesn't that make you understand—"

"There's nothing quite so dead as a love that a man doesn't want to revive," he said shortly; "do you understand that?"

She shuddered and paled, and a long silence came between them. The cold dawn that was creeping over the land stole into the office with them and found the fires of affection turned to the ashes of unwelcome memory. The woman seemed to realize at last, for she gave a little shiver and looked up at Trevison with a wan smile.

"I—I think I understand, Trev. Oh, I am *so* sorry! But I am not going away. I am going to stay in Manti, to be near you—if you want me. And you will want me, some day." She went close to him. "Won't you kiss me—once, Trev? For the sake of old times?"

"You'd better go," he said gruffly, turning his head. And then, as she opened the door and stood upon the

threshold, he stepped after her, saying: "I'll get your horse."

"There's two of them," she laughed tremulously. "I came in a buckboard."

"Two, then," he said soberly as he followed her out. "And say—" He turned, flushing. "You came at dusk, last night. I'm afraid I haven't been exactly thoughtful. Wait—I'll rustle up something to eat."

"I—I couldn't touch it, thank you. Trev—" She started toward him impulsively, but he turned his back grimly and went toward the corral.

Sunrise found Hester back at the Bar B. Jealous, hurt eyes had watched from an upstairs window the approach of the buckboard—had watched the Diamond K trail the greater part of the night. For, knowing of the absence of women at the Diamond K, Rosalind had anticipated Hester's return the previous evening—for the distance that separated the two ranches was not more than two miles. But the girl's vigil had been unrewarded until now. And when at last she saw the buckboard coming, scorn and rage, furious and deep, seized her. Ah, it was bold, brazen, disgraceful!

But she forced herself to calmness as she went down stairs to greet her guest—for there might have been some excuse for the lapse of propriety—some accident—something, anything.

"I expected you last night," she said as she met Hester at the door. "You were delayed I presume. Has anything happened?"

"Nothing, dearie." Only the bold significance of Hester's smile hid its deliberate maliciousness. "Trev was so glad to see me that he simply wouldn't let me go. And it was daylight before we realized it."

The girl gasped. And now, looking at the woman, she saw what Trevison had seen — staring back at her, naked and repulsive. She shuddered, and her face whitened.

"There are hotels at Manti, Mrs. Harvey," she said coldly.

"Oh, very well!" The woman did not change her smile. "I shall be very glad to take advantage of your kind invitation. For Trev tells me that presently there will be much bitterness between your crowd and himself, and I am certain that he wouldn't want me to stay here. If you will kindly have a man bring my trunks—"

And so she rode toward Manti. Not until the varying undulations of the land hid her from view of the Bar B ranchhouse did she lose the malicious smile. Then it faded, and furious sobs of disappointment shook her.

CHAPTER XVIII

LAW INVOKED AND DEFIED

AS SOON as the deputies had gone, two of them nursing injured heads, and all exhibiting numerous bruises, Judge Lindman rose and dressed. In the ghostly light preceding the dawn he went to the safe, his fingers trembling so that he made difficult work with the combination. He got a record from out of the safe, pulled out the bottom drawer of a series filled with legal documents and miscellaneous articles, laid the record book on the floor and shoved the drawer in over it. An hour later he was facing Corrigan, who on getting a report of the incident from one of the deputies, had hurried to get the Judge's version. The Judge had had time to regain his composure, though he was still slightly pale and nervous.

The Judge lied glibly. He had seen no one in the courthouse. His first knowledge that anyone had been there had come when he had heard the voice of one of the deputies, calling to him. And then all he had seen was a shadowy figure that had leaped and struck. After that there had been some shooting. And then the men had escaped.

"No one spoke?"

"Not a word," said the Judge. "That is, of course, no one but the man who called to me."

"Did they take anything?"

"What is there to take? There is nothing of value."

"Gieger says one of them was working at the safe. What's in there?"

"Some books and papers and supplies—nothing of value. That they tried to get into the safe would seem to indicate that they thought there was money there—Manti has many strangers who would not hesitate at robbery."

"They didn't get into the safe, then?"

"I haven't looked inside—nothing seems to be disturbed, as it would were the men safe-blowers. In their hurry to get away it would seem, if they had come to get into the safe, they would have left something behind—tools, or something of that character."

"Let's have a look at the safe. Open it!" Corrigan seemed to be suspicious, and with a pulse of trepidation, the Judge knelt and worked the combination. When the door came open Corrigan dropped on his knees in front of it and began to pull out the contents, scattering them in his eagerness. He stood up after a time, scowling, his face flushed. He turned on the Judge, grasped him by the shoulders, his fingers gripping so hard that the Judge winced.

"Look here, Lindman," he said. "Those men were not ordinary robbers. Experienced men would know better than to crack a safe in a courthouse when there's a bank right next door. I've an idea that it was some of Trevison's work. You've done or said something that's given him the notion that you've got the original record. Have you?"

"I swear I have said nothing," declared the Judge.

Corrigan looked at him steadily for a moment and then released him. "You burned it, eh?"

The Judge nodded, and Corrigan compressed his lips. "I suppose it's all right, but I can't help wishing that I had been here to watch the ceremony of burning that record. I'd feel a damn sight more secure. But understand this: If you double-cross me in any detail of this game, you'll never go to the penitentiary for what Benham knows about you—I'll choke the gizzard out of you!" He took a turn around the room, stopping at last in front of the Judge.

"Now we'll talk business. I want you to issue an order permitting me to erect mining machinery on Trevison's land. We need coal here."

"Graney gave notice of appeal," protested the Judge.

"Which the Circuit Court denied."

"He'll go to Washington," persisted the Judge, gulping. "I can't legally do it."

Corrigan laughed. "Appoint a receiver to operate the mine, pending the Supreme Court decision. Appoint Braman. Graney has no case, anyway. There is no record or deed."

"There is no need of haste," Lindman cautioned; "you can't get mining machinery here for some time yet."

Corrigan laughed, dragging the Judge to a window, from which he pointed out some flat-cars standing on a siding, loaded with lumber, machinery, corrugated iron, shutes, cables, trucks, "T" rails, and other articles that the Judge did not recognize.

The Judge exclaimed in astonishment. Corrigan grunted.

"I ordered that stuff six weeks ago, in anticipation of my victory in your court. You can see how I trusted in your honesty and perspicacity. I'll have it on the ground tomorrow—some of it today. Of course I want to proceed legally, and in order to do that I'll have to have the court order this morning. You do whatever is necessary."

At daylight he was in the laborers' camp, skirting the railroad at the edge of town, looking for Carson. He found the big Irishman in one of the larger tent-houses, talking with the cook, who was preparing breakfast amid a smother of smoke and the strong mingled odors of frying bacon and coffee. Corrigan went only to the flap of the tent, motioning Carson outside.

Walking away from the tent toward some small frame buildings down the track, Corrigan said:

"There are several carloads of material there," pointing to the flat-cars which he had shown to the Judge. "I've hired a mining man to superintend the erection of that stuff—it's mining machinery and material for buildings. I want you to place as many of your men as you can spare at the disposal of the engineer; his name's Pickand, and you'll find him at the cars at eight o'clock. I'll have some more laborers sent over from the dam. Give him as many men as he wants; go with him yourself, if he wants you."

"What are ye goin' to mine?"

"Coal."

"Where?"

"I've been looking over the land with Pickand; he says we'll sink a shaft at the base of the butte below the mesa, where you are laying tracks now. We won't have to go far, Pickand says. There's coal—thick veins of it—running back into the wall of the butte."

"All right, sir," said Carson. But he scratched his head in perplexity, eyeing Corrigan sidelong. "Ye woudn't be sayin' that ye'll be diggin' for coal on the railroad's right av way, wud ye?"

"No!" snapped Corrigan.

"Thin it will be on Trevison's land. Have ye bargained wid him for it?"

"No! Look here, Carson. Mind your own business and do as you're told!"

"I'm elicted, I s'pose; but it's a job I ain't admirin' to do. If ye've got half the sinse I give ye credit for havin', ye'll be lettin' that mon Trevison alone—I'd a lot sooner smoke a segar in that shed av dynamite than to cross him!"

Corrigan smiled and turned to look in the direction in which the Irishman was pointing. A small, flat-roofed frame building, sheathed with corrugated iron, met his view. Crude signs, large enough to be read hundreds of feet distant, were affixed to the walls:

"CAUTION. DYNAMITE."

"Do you keep much of it there?"

"Enough for anny blastin' we have to do. There's plenty—half a ton, mebbe."

"Who's got the key?"

"Meself."

Corrigan returned to town, breakfasted, mounted a horse and rode out to the dam, where he gave orders for some laborers to be sent to Carson. At nine o'clock he was back in Manti talking with Pickand, and watching the dinky engine as it pulled the loaded flat-cars westward over the tracks. He left Pickand and went to his office in the bank building, where he conferred with some men regarding various buildings and improvements in contemplation, and shortly after ten, glancing out of a window, he saw a buckboard stop in front of the *Castle* hotel. Corrigan waited a little, then closed his desk and walked across the street. Shortly he confronted Hester Harvey in her room. He saw from her downcast manner that she had failed. His face darkened.

"Wouldn't work, eh? What did he say?"

The woman was hunched down in her chair, still wearing the cloak that she had worn in Trevison's office; the collar still up, the front thrown open. Her hair was disheveled; dark lines were under her eyes; she glared at Corrigan in an abandon of savage dejection.

"He turned me down—cold." Her laugh held the bitterness of self-derision. "I'm through, there, Jeff."

"Hell!" cursed the man. She looked at him, her lips curving with amused contempt.

"Oh, you're all right—don't worry. That's all you care about, isn't it?" She laughed harshly at the quickened light in his eyes. "You'd see me sacrifice

myself; you wouldn't give me a word of sympathy. That's you! That's the way of all men. Give, give, give! That's the masculine chorus—the hunting-song of the human wolf-pack!”

“Don't talk like that—it ain't like you, kid. You were always the gamest little dame I ever knew.” He essayed to take the hand that was twisted in the folds of her cloak, but she drew it away from him in a fury. And the eagerness in his eyes betrayed the insincerity of his attempt at consolation; she saw it—the naked selfishness of his look—and sneered at him.

“You want the good news, eh? The good for you? That's all you care about. After you get it, I'll get the husks of your pity. Well, here it is. I've poisoned them both—against each other. I told him she was against him in this land business. And it hurt me to see how gamely he took it, Jeff!” her voice broke, but she choked back the sob and went on, hoarsely: “He didn't make a whimper. Not even when I told him you were going to marry her—that you were engaged. But there was a fire in those eyes of his that I would give my soul to see there for me!”

“Yes—yes,” said the man, impatiently.

“Oh, you devil!” she railed at him. “I've made him think it was a frame-up between you and her—to get information out of him; I told him that she had strung him along for a month or so—amusing herself. And he believes it.”

“Good!”

“And I've made her believe that he sent for me,” she went on, her voice leaping to cold savagery. “I

stayed all night at his place, and I went back to the Bar B in the morning—this morning—and made Rosalind Benham think—Ha, ha! She ordered me away from the house—the hussy! She's through with him—any fool could tell that. But it's different with him, Jeff. He won't give her up; he isn't that kind. He'll fight for her—and he'll have her!"

The eager, pleased light died out of Corrigan's face, his lips set in an ugly pout. But he contrived to smile as he got up.

"You've done well—so far. But don't give him up. Maybe he'll change his mind. Stay here—I'll stake you to the limit." He laid a roll of bills on a stand—she did not look at them—and approached her in a second endeavor to console her. But she waved him away, saying: "Get out of here—I want to think!" And he obeyed, looking back before he closed the door.

"Selfish?" he muttered, going down the street. "Well, what of it? That's a human weakness, isn't it? Get what you want, and to hell with other people!"

Trevison had gone to his room for a much-needed rest. He had watched Hester Harvey go with no conscious regret, but with a certain grim pity, which was as futile as her visit. But, lying on the bed he fought hard against the bitter scorn that raged in him over the contemplation of Rosalind Benham's duplicity. He found it hard to believe that she had been duping him, for during the weeks of his acquaintance with her he had studied her much—with admiration-weighted prejudice, of course, since she made a strong appeal

to him—and he had been certain, then, that she was as free from guile as a child—excepting any girl's natural artifices by which she concealed certain emotions that men had no business trying to read. He had read some of them—his business or not—and he had imagined he had seen what had fired his blood—a reciprocal affection. He would not have declared himself, otherwise.

He went to sleep, thinking of her. He awoke about noon, to see Barkwell standing at his side, shaking him.

"Have you got any understandin' with that railroad gang that they're to do any minin' on the Diamond K range?"

"No."

"Well, they're gettin' ready to do it. Over at the butte near the railroad cut. I passed there a while ago an' quizzed the big guy—Corrigan—about a gang workin' there. He says they're goin' to mine coal. I asked him if he had your permission an' he said he didn't need it. I reckon they ain't none shy on gall where that guy come from!"

Trevison got out of bed and buckled on his cartridge belt and pistol. "The boys are working the Willow Creek range," he said, sharply. "Get them, tell them to load up with plenty of cartridges, and join me at the butte."

He heard Barkwell go leaping down the stairs, his spurs striking the step edges, and a few minutes later, riding Nigger out of the corral he saw the foreman racing away in a dust cloud. He followed the bed of the river, himself, going at a slow lope, for he wanted

time to think—to gain control of the rage that boiled in his veins. He conquered it, and when he came in sight of the butte he was cool and deliberate, though on his face was that “mean” look that Carson had once remarked about to his friend Murphy, partly hidden by the “tiger” smile which, the Irishman had discovered, preceded action, ruthless and swift.

The level below the butte was a-buzz with life and energy. Scores of laborers were rushing about under the direction of a tall, thin, bespectacled man who seemed to be the moving spirit in all the activity. He shouted orders to Carson—Trevison saw the big figure of the Irishman dominating the laborers—who repeated them, added to them; sending men scampering hither and thither. Pausing at a little distance down the level, Trevison watched the scene. At first all seemed confusion, but presently he was able to discern that method ruled. For he now observed that the laborers were divided into “gangs.” Some were unloading the flat-cars, others were “assembling” a stationary engine near the wall of the butte. They had a roof over it, already. Others were laying tracks that intersected with the main line; still others were erecting buildings along the level. They were on Trevison’s land—there was no doubt of that. Moreover, they were erecting their buildings and apparatus at the point where Trevison himself had contemplated making a start. He saw Corrigan seated on a box on one of the flat-cars, smoking a cigar; another man, whom Trevison recognized as Gieger—he would have been willing to swear the man was one of those who had

thwarted his plans in the courthouse—standing beside him, a Winchester rifle resting in the hollow of his left arm. Trevison urged Nigger along the level, down the track, and halted near Corrigan and Gieger. He knew that Corrigan had seen him, but it pleased the other to pretend that he had not.

“This is your work, Corrigan—I take it?” said Trevison, bluntly.

Corrigan turned slowly. He was a good actor, for he succeeded in getting a fairly convincing counterfeit of surprise into his face as his gaze fell on his enemy.

“You have taken it correctly, sir.” He smiled blandly, though there was a snapping alertness in his eyes that belied his apparent calmness. He turned to Gieger, ignoring Trevison. “Organization is the thing. Pickand is a genius at it,” he said.

Trevison’s eyes flamed with rage over this deliberate insult. But in it he saw a cold design to make him lose his temper. The knowledge brought a twisting smile to his face.

“You have permission to begin this work, I suppose?”

Corrigan turned again, as though astonished at the persistence of the other. “Certainly, sir. This work is being done under a court order, issued this morning. I applied for it yesterday. I am well within my legal rights, the court having as you are aware, settled the question of the title.”

“You know I have appealed the case?”

“I have not been informed that you have done so. In any event such an appeal would not prevent me min-

ing the coal on the property, pending the hearing of the case in the higher court. Judge Lindman has appointed a receiver, who is bonded; and the work is to proceed under his direction. I am here merely as an onlooker."

He looked fairly at Trevison, his eyes gleaming with cold derision. The expression maddened the other beyond endurance, and his eyes danced the chill glitter of meditated violence, unrecking consequences.

"You're a sneaking crook, Corrigan, and you know it! You're going too far! You've had Braman appointed in order to escape the responsibility! You're hiding behind him like a coward! Come out into the open and fight like a man!"

Corrigan's face bloated poisonously, but he made no hostile move. "I'll kill you for that some day!" he whispered. "Not now," he laughed mirthlessly as the other stiffened; "I can't take the risk right now—I've too much depending on me. But you've been damned impertinent and troublesome, and when I get you where I want you I'm going to serve you like this!" And he took the cigar from his mouth, dropped it to the floor of the car and ground it to pieces under his heel. He looked up again, at Trevison, and their gaze met, in each man's eyes glowed the knowledge of imminent action, ruthless and terrible.

Trevison broke the tension with a laugh that came from between his teeth. "Why delay?" he mocked. "I've been ready for the grinding process since the first day."

"Enough of this!" Corrigan turned to Gieger with

a glance of cold intolerance. "This man is a nuisance," he said to the deputy. "Carry out the mandate of the court and order him away. If he doesn't go, kill him! He is a trespasser, and has no right here!" And he glared at Trevison.

"You've got to get out, mister," said the deputy. He tapped his rifle menacingly, betraying a quick accession of rage that he caught, no doubt, from Corrigan. Trevison smiled coldly, and backed Nigger a little. For an instant he meditated resistance, and dropped his right hand to the butt of his pistol. A shout distracted his attention. It came from behind him—it sounded like a warning, and he wheeled, to see Carson running toward him, not more than ten feet distant, waving his hands, a huge smile on his face.

"Domned if it ain't Trevison!" he yelled as he lunged forward and caught Trevison's right hand in his own, pulling the rider toward him. "I've been wantin' to spake a word wid ye for two weeks now—about thim cows which me brother in Illinoy has been askin' me about, an' divvil a chance have I had to see ye!" And as he yanked Trevison's shoulders downward with a sudden pressure that there was no resisting, he whispered, rapidly.

"Diputies—thirty av thim wid Winchesters—on the other side av the flat-cars. It's a thrap to do away wid ye—I heard 'em cookin' it!"

"An' ye wudn't be sellin' 'em to me at twinty-five, eh?" he said, aloud. "Go 'long wid ye—ye're a domned hold-up man, like all the rist av thim!" And he slapped the black horse playfully in the ribs and

laughed gleefully as the animal lunged at him, ears laid back, mouth open.

His eyes cold, his lips hard and straight, Trevison spurred the black again to the flat-car.

"The bars are down between us, Corrigan; it's man to man from now on. Law or no law, I give you twenty-four hours to get your men and apparatus off my land. After that I won't be responsible for what happens!" He heard a shout behind him, a clatter, and he turned to see ten or twelve of his men racing over the level toward him. At the same instant he heard a sharp exclamation from Corrigan; heard Gieger issue a sharp order, and a line of men raised their heads above the flat-cars, rifles in their hands, which they trained on the advancing cowboys.

Nigger leaped; his rider holding up one hand, the palm toward his men, as a sign to halt, while he charged into them. Trevison talked fast to them, while the laborers, suspending work, watched, muttering; and the rifles, resting on the flat-cars, grew steadier in their owners' hands. The silence grew deeper; the tension was so great that when somewhere a man dropped a shovel, it startled the watchers like a sudden bomb.

It was plain that Trevison's men wanted to fight. It was equally plain that Trevison was arguing to dissuade them. And when, muttering, and casting belligerent looks backward, they finally drew off, Trevison following, there was a sigh of relief from the watchers, while Corrigan's face was black with disappointment.

CHAPTER XIX

A WOMAN RIDES IN VAIN

OUT of Rosalind Benham's resentment against Trevison for the Hester Harvey incident grew a sudden dull apathy—which presently threatened to become an aversion—for the West. Its crudeness, the uncouthness of its people; the emptiness, the monotony, began to oppress her. Noticing the waning of her enthusiasm, Agatha began to inject energetic condemnations of the country into her conversations with the girl, and to hint broadly of the contrasting allurements of the East.

But Rosalind was not yet ready to desert the Bar B. She had been hurt, and her interest in the country had dulled, but there were memories over which one might meditate until—until one could be certain of some things. This was hope, insistently demanding delay of judgment. The girl could not forget the sincere ring in Trevison's voice when he had told her that he would never go back to Hester Harvey. Arrayed against this declaration was the cold fact of Hester's visit, and Hester's statement that Trevison had sent for her. In this jumble of contradiction hope found a fertile field.

If Corrigan had anticipated that the knowledge of Hester's visit to Trevison would have the effect of

centering Rosalind's interest on him, he had erred. Corrigan was magnetic; the girl felt the lure of him. In his presence she was continually conscious of his masterfulness, with a dismayed fear that she would yield to it. She knew this sensation was not love, for it lacked the fire and the depth of the haunting, breathless surge of passion that she had felt when she had held Trevison off the day when he had declared his love for her—that she felt whenever she thought of him. But with Trevison lost to her—she did not know what would happen, then. For the present her resentment was sufficient to keep her mind occupied.

She had a dread of meeting Corrigan this morning. Also, Agatha's continued deprecatory speeches had begun to annoy her, and at ten o'clock she ordered one of the men to saddle her horse.

She rode southward, following a trail that brought her to Levins' cabin. The cabin was built of logs, smoothly hewn and tightly joined, situated at the edge of some timber in a picturesque spot at a point where a shallow creek doubled in its sweep toward some broken country west of Manti.

Rosalind had visited Mrs. Levins many times. The warmth of her welcome on her first visit had resulted in a quick intimacy which, with an immediate estimate of certain needs by Rosalind, had brought her back in the rôle of Lady Bountiful. "Chuck" and "Sissy" Levins welcomed her vociferously as she splashed across the river to the door of the cabin this morning.

"You're clean spoilin' them, Miss Rosalind!" declared the mother, watching from the doorway;

"they've got so they expect you to bring them a present every time you come."

Sundry pats and kisses sufficed to assuage the pangs of disappointment suffered by the children, and shortly afterward Rosalind was inside the cabin, talking with Mrs. Levins, and watching Clay, who was painstakingly mending a breach in his cartridge belt.

Rosalind had seen Clay once only, and that at a distance, and she stole interested glances at him. There was a certain attraction in Clay's lean face, with its cold, alert furtiveness, but it was an attraction that bred chill instead of warmth, for his face revealed a wild, reckless, intolerant spirit, remorseless, contemptuous of law and order. Several times she caught him watching her, and his narrowed, probing glances disconcerted her. She cut her visit short because of his presence, and when she rose to go he turned in his chair.

"You like this country, ma'am?"

"Well—yes. But it is much different, after the East."

"Some smother there, eh? Folks are slicker?"

She eyed him appraisingly, for there was an undercurrent of significance in his voice. She smiled. "Well—I suppose so. You see, competition is keener in the East, and it rather sharpens one's wits, I presume."

"H'm. I reckon you're right. This railroad has brought some *mighty* slick ones here. Mighty slick an' gally." He looked at her truculently. "Corrigan's one of the slick ones. Friend of yours, eh?"

"Clay!" remonstrated his wife, sharply.

He turned on her roughly. "You keep out of **this**!

I ain't meanin' nothin' wrong. But I reckon when any-one's got a sneakin' coyote for a friend an' don't know it, it's doin' 'em a good turn to spit things right out, frank an' fair.

"This Corrigan ain't on the level, ma'am. Do you know what he's doin'? He's skinnin' the folks in this country out of about a hundred thousand acres of land. He's clouded every damn title. He's got a fake bill of sale to show that he bought the land years ago—which he didn't—an' he's got a little beast of a judge here to back him up in his play. They've done away with the original record of the land, an' rigged up another, which makes Corrigan's title clear. It's the rankest robbery that any man ever tried to pull off, an' if he's a friend of yourn you ought to cut him off your visitin' list!"

"How do you know that? Who told you?" asked the girl, her face whitening, for the man's vehemence and evident earnestness were convincing.

"'Brand' Trevison told me. It hits him mighty damned hard. He had a deed to his land. Corrigan broke open his office an' stole it. Trevison's certain sure his deed was on the record, for he went to Dry Bottom with Buck Peters—the man he bought the land from—an' seen it wrote down on the record!" He laughed harshly. "There's goin' to be hell to pay here. Trevison won't stand for it—though the other gillies are advisin' caution. Caution hell! I'm for cleanin' the scum out! Do you know what Corrigan done, yesterday? He got thirty or so deputies—pluguglies that he's hired—an' hid 'em behind some

flat-cars down on the level where they're erectin' some minin' machinery. He laid a trap for 'Firebrand,' expectin' him to come down there, rippin' mad because they was puttin' the minin' machinery up on his land, wi'out his permission. They was goin' to shoot him — Corrigan put 'em up to it. That Carson fello' heard it an' put 'Firebrand' wise. An' the shootin' didn't come off. But that's only the beginnin'!"

"Did Trevison tell you to tell me this?" The girl was stunned, amazed, incredulous. For her father was concerned in this, and if he had any knowledge that Corrigan was stealing land—if he *was* stealing it—he was guilty as Corrigan. If he had no knowledge of it, she might be able to prevent the steal by communicating with him.

"Trevison tell me?" laughed Levins, scornfully; "'Firebrand' ain't no pussy-kitten fighter which depends on women standin' between him an' trouble. I'm tellin' you on my own hook, so's that big stiff Corrigan won't get swelled up, thinkin' he's got a chance to hitch up with you in the matrimonial wagon. That guy's got murder in his heart, girl. Did you hear of me shootin' that sneak, Marchmont?" The girl had heard rumors of the affair; she nodded, and Levins went on. "It was Corrigan that hired me to do it—payin' me a thousand, cash." His wife gasped, and he spoke gently to her. "That's all right, Ma; it wasn't no cold-blooded affair — Jim Marchmont knowed a sister of mine pretty intimate, when he was out here years ago, an' I settled a debt that I thought I owed to her, that's all. I ain't none sorry, neither — I knowed him soon as Corrigan

mentioned his name. But I hadn't no time to call his attention to things — I had to plug him, sudden. I'm sorry I've said this, ma'am, now that it's out," he said in a changed voice, noting the girl's distress; "but I felt you ought to know who you're dealin' with."

Rosalind went out, swaying, her knees shaking. She heard Levins' wife reproving him; heard the man replying gruffly. She felt that it *must* be so. She cared nothing about Corrigan, beyond a certain regret, but a wave of sickening fear swept over her at the growing conviction that her father *must* know something of all this. And if, as Levins said, Corrigan was attempting to defraud these people, she felt that common justice required that she head him off, if possible. By defeating Corrigan's aim she would, of course, be aiding Trevison, and through him Hester Harvey, whom she had grown to despise, but that hatred should not deter her. She mounted her horse in a fever of anxiety and raced it over the plains toward Manti, determined to find Corrigan and force him to tell her the truth.

Half way to town she saw a rider coming, and she slowed her own horse, taking the rider to be Corrigan, coming to the Bar B. She saw her mistake when the rider was within a hundred feet of her. She blushed, then paled, and started to pass the rider without speaking, for it was Trevison. She looked up when he urged Nigger against her animal, blocking the trail, frowning.

"Look here," he said; "what's wrong? Why do you avoid me? I saw you on the Diamond K range the other day, and when I started to ride toward you

you whipped up your horse. You tried to pass me just now. What have I done to deserve it?"

She could not tell him about Hester Harvey, of course, and so she was silent, blushing a little. He took her manner as an indication of guilt, and gritted his teeth with the pain that the discovery caused him, for he had been hoping, too—that his suspicions of her were groundless.

"I do not care to discuss the matter with you." She looked fairly at him, her resentment flaming in her eyes, fiercely indignant over his effrontery in addressing her in that manner, after his affair with Hester Harvey. She was going to help him, but that did not mean that she was going to blind herself to his faults, or to accept them mutely. His bold confidence in himself—which she had once admired—repelled her now; she saw in it the brazen egotism of the gross sensualist, seeking new victims.

"I am in a hurry," she said, stiffly; "you will pardon me if I proceed."

He jumped Nigger off the trail and watched with gloomy, disappointed eyes, her rapid progress toward Manti. Then he urged Nigger onward, toward Levins' cabin. "I'll have to erect another monument to my faith in women," he muttered. And certain reckless, grim thoughts that had rioted in his mind since the day before, now assumed a definiteness that made his blood leap with eagerness.

Later, when Rosalind sat opposite Corrigan at his desk, she found it hard to believe Levins' story. The big man's smooth plausibility made Levins' recital seem

like the weird imaginings of a disordered mind, goaded to desperation by opposition. And again, his magnetism, his polite consideration for her feelings, his ingenuous, smiling deference—so sharply contrasted with Trevison's direct bluntness—swayed her, and she sat, perplexed, undecided, when he finished the explanation she had coldly demanded of him.

"It is the invariable defense of these squatters," he added; "that they are being robbed. In this case they have embellished their hackneyed tale somewhat by dragging the court into it, and telling you that absurd story about the shooting of Marchmont. Could you tell me what possible interest I could have in wanting Marchmont killed? Don't you think, Miss Rosalind, that Levins' reference to his sister discloses the real reason for the man's action? Levins' story that I paid him a thousand dollars is a fabrication, pure and simple. I paid Jim Marchmont a thousand dollars that morning, which was the balance due him on our contract. The transaction was witnessed by Judge Lindman. After Marchmont was shot, Levins took the money from him."

"Why wasn't Levins arrested?"

"It seems that public opinion was with Levins. A great many people here knew of the ancient trouble between them." He passed from that, quickly. "The tale of the robbery of Trevison's office is childlike, for the reason that Trevison had no deed. Judge Lindman is an honored and respected official. And—" he added as a last argument "—your father is the respected head of a large and important railroad. Is it

logical to suppose that he would lend his influence and his good name to any such ridiculous scheme?"

She sighed, almost convinced. Corrigan went on, earnestly:

"This man Trevison is a disturber—he has always been that. He has no respect for the law or property. He associates with the self-confessed murderer, Levins. He is a riotous, reckless, egotistical fool who, because the law stands in the way of his desires, wishes to trample it under foot and allow mob rule to take its place. Do you remember you mentioned that he once loved a woman named Hester Keyes? Well, he has brought Hester here—"

She got up, her chin at a scornful angle. "I do not care to hear about his personal affairs." She went out, mounted her horse, and rode slowly out the Bar B trail. From a window Corrigan watched her, and as she vanished into the distance he turned back to his desk, meditating darkly.

"Trevison put Levins up to that. He's showing yellow."

CHAPTER XX

AND RIDES AGAIN — IN VAIN

ROSALIND'S reflections as she rode toward the Bar B convinced her that there had been much truth in Corrigan's arraignment of Trevison. Out of her own knowledge of him, and from his own admission to her on the day they had ridden to Blakeley's the first time, she adduced evidence of his predilection for fighting, of his utter disregard for accepted authority—when that authority disagreed with his conception of justice; of his lawlessness when his desires were in question. His impetuosity was notorious, for it had earned him the sobriquet "Firebrand," which he could not have acquired except through the exhibition of those traits that she had enumerated.

She was disappointed and spiritless when she reached the ranchhouse, and very tired, physically. Agatha's questions irritated her, and she ate sparingly of the food set before her, eager to be alone. In the isolation of her room she lay dumbly on the bed, and there the absurdity of Levins' story assailed her. It must be as Corrigan had said—her father was too great a man to descend to such despicable methods. She dropped off to sleep.

When she awoke the sun had gone down, and her

room was cheerless in the semi-dusk. She got up, washed, combed her hair, and much refreshed, went downstairs and ate heartily, Agatha watching her narrowly.

"You are distraught, my dear," ventured her relative. "I don't think this country agrees with you. Has anything happened?"

The girl answered evasively, whereat Agatha compressed her lips.

"Don't you think that a trip East—"

"I shall not go home this summer!" declared Rosalind, vehemently. And noting the flash in the girl's eyes, belligerent and defiant; her swelling breast, the warning brilliance of her eyes, misty with pent-up emotion, Agatha wisely subsided and the meal was finished in a strained silence.

Later, Rosalind went out, alone, upon the porch where, huddled in a big rocker, she gazed gloomily at the lights of Manti, dim and distant. Something of the turmoil and the tumult of the town in its young strength and vigor, assailed her, contrasting sharply with the solemn peace of her own surroundings. Life had been a very materialistic problem to her, heretofore. She had lived it according to her environment, a mere onlooker, detached from the scheme of things. Something of the meaning of life trickled into her consciousness as she sat there watching the flickering lights of the town—something of the meaning of it all—the struggle of these new residents twanged a hidden chord of sympathy and understanding in her. She was able to visualize them as she sat there. Faces flashed

before her—strong, stern, eager; the owner of each a-thrill with his ambition, going forward in the march of progress with definite aim, planning, plotting, scheming—some of them winning, others losing, but all obsessed with a feverish desire of success. The railroad, the town, the ranches, the new dam, the people—all were elements of a conflict, waged ceaselessly. She sat erect, her blood tingling. Blows were being struck, taken.

"Oh," she cried, sharply; "it's a game! It's the spirit of the nation—to fight, to press onward, to win!" And in that moment she was seized with a throbbing sympathy for Trevison, and filled with a yearning that he might win, in spite of Corrigan, Hester Harvey, and all the others—even her father. For he was a courageous player of this "game." In him was typified the spirit of the nation.

Rosalind might have added something to her thoughts had she known of the passions that filled Trevison when, while she sat on the porch of the Bar B ranch-house, he mounted Nigger and sent him scurrying through the mellow moonlight toward Manti. He was playing the "game," with justice as his goal. The girl had caught something of the spirit of it all, but she had neglected to grasp the all-important element of the relations between men, without which laws, rules, and customs become farcical and ridiculous. He was determined to have justice. He knew well that Judge Graney's mission to Washington would result in failure unless the deed to his property could be recovered, or

the original record disclosed. Even then, with a weak and dishonest judge on the bench the issue might be muddled by a mass of legal technicalities. The court order permitting Braman to operate a mine on his property goaded him to fury.

He stopped at Hanrahan's saloon, finding Lefingwell there and talking with him for a few minutes. Lefingwell's docile attitude disgusted him—he said he had talked the matter over with a number of the other owners, and they had expressed themselves as being in favor of awaiting the result of his appeal. He left Lefingwell, not trusting himself to argue the question of the man's attitude, and went down to the station, where he found a telegram awaiting him. It was from Judge Graney:

Coming home. Case sent back to Circuit Court for hearing. Depend on you to get evidence.

Trevison crumpled the paper and shoved it savagely into a pocket. He stood for a long time on the station platform, in the dark, glowering at the lights of the town, then started abruptly and made his way into the gambling room of the *Plaza*, where he somberly watched the players. The rattle of chips, the whir of the wheel, the monotonous drone of the faro dealer, the hum of voices, some eager, some tense, others exultant or grumbling, the incessant jostling, irritated him. He went out the front door, stepped down into the street, and walked eastward. Passing an open space between two buildings he became aware of the figure

of a woman, and he wheeled as she stepped forward and grasped his arm. He recognized her and tried to pass on, but she clung to him.

"Trev!" she said, appealingly; "I want to talk with you. It's very important—really. Just a minute, Trev. Won't you talk *that* long! Come to my room—where—"

"Talk fast," he admonished, holding her off, "—and talk here."

She struggled with him, trying to come closer, twisting so that her body struck his, and the contact brought a grim laugh out of him. He seized her by the shoulders and held her at arm's length. "Talk from there—it's safer. Now, if you've anything important—"

"O Trev—please—" She laughed, almost sobbing, but forced the tears back when she saw derision blazing in his eyes.

"I told you it was all over!" He pushed her away and started off, but he had taken only two steps when she was at his side again.

"I saw you from my window, Trev. I—I knew it was you—I couldn't mistake you, anywhere. I followed you—saw you go into the *Plaza*. I came to warn you. Corrigan has planned to goad you into doing some rash thing so that he will have an excuse to jail or kill you!"

"Where did you hear that?"

"I—I just heard it. I was in the bank today, and I overheard him talking to a man—some officer, I think. Be careful, Trev—very careful, won't you?"

"Careful as I can," he laughed, lowly. "Thank

you." He started on again, and she grasped his arm. "Trev," she pleaded.

"What's the use, Hester?" he said; "it can't be."

"Well, God bless you, anyway, dear," she said chokingly.

He passed on, leaving her in the shadows of the buildings, and walked far out on the plains. Making a circuit to avoid meeting the woman again, he skirted the back yards, stumbling over tin cans and debris in his progress. When he got to the shed where he had hitched Nigger he mounted and rode down the railroad tracks toward the cut; where an hour later he was joined by Clay Levins, who came toward him, riding slowly and cautiously.

Patrick Carson had wooed sleep unsuccessfully. For hours he lay on his cot in the tent, staring out through the flap at the stars. A vague unrest had seized him. He heard the hilarious din of Manti steadily decrease in volume until only intermittent noises reached his ears. But even when comparative peace came he was still wide awake.

"I'll be gettin' the willies av I lay here much longer widout slape," he confided to his pillow. "Mebbe a turn down the track wid me dujeen wud do the thrick." He got up, lighted his pipe and strode off into the semi-gloom of the railroad track. He went aimlessly, paying little attention to objects around him. He passed the tents wherein the laborers lay—and smiled as heavy snores smote his ears. "They slape a heap harder than they worruk, bedad!" he observed, grin-

ning. "Nothin' c'ud trouble a ginney's conscience, annyway," he scoffed. "But, accordin' to that they must be a heap on me own!" Which observation sent his thoughts to Corrigan. "Begob, there's a man! A domned rogue, if iver they was one!"

He passed the tents, smoking thoughtfully. He paused when he came to the small buildings scattered about at quite a distance from the tents, then left the tracks and made his way through the deep alkali dust toward them.

"Whativer wud Corrigan be askin' about the dynamite for? 'How much do ye kape av it?' he was askin'. As if it was anny av his business!"

He stopped puffing at his pipe and stood rigid, watching with bulging eyes, for he saw the door of the dynamite shed move outward several inches, as though someone inside had shoved it. It closed again, slowly, and Carson was convinced that he had been seen. He was no coward, but a cold sweat broke out on him and his knees doubled weakly. For any man who would visit the dynamite shed around midnight, in this stealthy manner, must be in a desperate frame of mind, and Carson's virile imagination drew lurid pictures of a gun duel in which a stray shot penetrated the wall of the shed. He shivered at the roar of the explosion that followed; he even drew a gruesome picture of stretchers and mangled flesh that brought a groan out of him.

But in spite of his mental stress he lunged forward, boldly, though his breath wheezed from his lungs in great gasps. His body lagged, but his will was indomitable, once he quit looking at the pictures of his imagi-

nation. He was at the door of the shed in a dozen strides.

The lock had been forced; the hasp was hanging, suspended from a twisted staple. Carson had no pistol—it would have been useless, anyway.

Carson hesitated, vacillating between two courses. Should he return for help, or should he secrete himself somewhere and watch? The utter foolhardiness of attempting the capture of the prowler single handed assailed him, and he decided on retreat. He took one step, and then stood rigid in his tracks, for a voice filtered thinly through the doorway, hoarse, vibrant:

“Don’t forget the fuses.”

Carson’s lips formed the word: “Trevison!”

Carson’s breath came easier; his thoughts became more coherent, his recollection vivid; his sympathies leaped like living things. When his thoughts dwelt upon the scene at the butte during Trevison’s visit while the mining machinery was being erected—the trap that Corrigan had prepared for the man—a grim smile wreathed his face, for he strongly suspected what was meant by Trevison’s visit to the dynamite shed.

He slipped cautiously around a corner of the shed, making no sound in the deep dust surrounding it, and stole back the way he had come, tingling.

“Begob, I’ll slape now—a little while!”

As Carson vanished down the tracks a head was stuck out through the doorway of the shed and turned so that its owner could scan his surroundings.

“All clear,” he whispered.

“Get going, then,” said another voice, and two men,

their faces muffled with handkerchiefs, bearing something that bulked their pockets oddly, slipped out of the door and fled noiselessly, like gliding shadows, down the track toward the cut.

Rosalind had been asleep in the rocker. A cool night breeze, laden with the strong, pungent aroma of sage, sent a shiver over her and she awoke, to see that the lights of Manti had vanished. An eerie lonesomeness had settled around her.

"Why, it must be nearly midnight!" she said. She got up, yawning, and stepped toward the door, wondering why Agatha had not called her. But Agatha had retired, resenting the girl's manner.

Almost to the door, Rosalind detected movement in the ghostly semi-light that flooded the plains between the porch and the picturesque spot, more than a mile away, on which Levins' cabin stood. She halted at the door and watched, and when the moving object resolved into a horse, loping swiftly, she strained her eyes toward it. At first it seemed to have no rider, but when it had approached to within a hundred yards of her, she gasped, leaped off the porch and ran toward the horse. An instant later she stood at the animal's head, voicing her astonishment.

"Why, it's Chuck Levins! Why on earth are you riding around at this hour of the night?"

"Sissy's sick. Maw wants you to please come an' see what you can do—if it ain't too much trouble."

"Trouble?" The girl laughed. "I should say not! Wait until I saddle my horse!"

She ran to the porch and stole silently into the house, emerging with a small medicine case, which she stuck into a pocket of her coat. Once before she had had occasion to use her simple remedies on Sissy — an illness as simple as her remedies; but she could feel something of Mrs. Levins' concern for her offspring, and — and it was an ideal night for a gallop over the plains.

It was almost midnight by the Levins' clock when she entered the cabin, and a quick diagnosis of her case with an immediate application of one of her remedies, brought results. At half past twelve Sissy was sleeping peacefully, and Chuck had dozed off, fully dressed, no doubt ready to re-enact his manly and heroic rôle upon call.

It was not until Rosalind was ready to go that Mrs. Levins apologized for her husband's rudeness to his guest.

"Clay feels awfully bitter against Corrigan. It's because Corrigan is fighting Trevison — and Trevison is Clay's friend — they've been like brothers. Trevison has done so much for us."

Rosalind glanced around the cabin. She had meant to ask Chuck why his father had not come on the midnight errand, but had forebore. "Mr. Levins isn't here?"

"Clay went away about nine o'clock." The woman did not meet Rosalind's direct gaze; she flushed under it and looked downward, twisting her fingers in her apron. Rosalind had noted a strangeness in the woman's manner when she had entered the cabin, but she had ascribed it to the child's illness, and had thought

nothing more of it. But now it burst upon her with added force, and when she looked up again Rosalind saw there was an odd, strained light in her eyes—a fear, a dread—a sinister something that she shrank from. Rosalind remembered the killing of Marchmont, and had a quick divination of impending trouble.

"What is it, Mrs. Levins? What has happened?"

The woman gulped hard, and clenched her hands. Evidently, whatever her trouble, she had determined to bear it alone, but was now wavering.

"Tell me, Mrs. Levins; perhaps I can help you?"

"You can!" The words burst sobbingly from the woman. "Maybe you can prevent it. But, oh, Miss Rosalind, I wasn't to say anything—Clay told me not to. But I'm so afraid! Clay's so hot-headed, and Trevison is so daring! I'm afraid they won't stop at anything!"

"But what is it?" demanded Rosalind, catching something of the woman's excitement.

"It's about the machinery at the butte—the mining machinery. My God, you'll never say I told you—will you? But they're going to blow it up tonight—Clay and Trevison; they're going to dynamite it! I'm afraid there will be murder done!"

"Why didn't you tell me before?" The girl stood rigid, white, breathless.

"Oh, I ought to," moaned the woman. "But I was afraid you'd tell—Corrigan—somebody—and—and they'd get into trouble with the law!"

"I won't tell—but I'll stop it—if there's time! For your sake. Trevison is the one to blame."

She inquired about the location of the butte; the shortest trail, and then ran out to her horse. Once in the saddle she drew a deep breath and sent the animal scampering into the flood of moonlight.

Down toward the cut the two men ran, and when they reached a gully at a distance of several hundred feet from the dynamite shed they came upon their horses. Mounting, they rode rapidly down the track toward the butte where the mining machinery was being erected. They had taken the handkerchiefs off while they ran, and now Trevison laughed with the hearty abandon of a boy whose mischievous prank has succeeded.

"That was easy. I thought I heard a noise, though, when you backed against the door and shoved it open."

"Nobody usually monkeys around a dynamite shed at night," returned Levins. "Whew! There's enough of that stuff there to blow Manti to Kingdom Come—wherever that is."

They rode boldly across the level at the base of the butte, for they had reconnoitered after meeting on the plains just outside of town, and knew Corrigan had left no one on guard.

"It's a cinch," Levins declared as they dismounted from their horses in the shelter of a shoulder of the butte, about a hundred yards from where the corrugated iron building, nearly complete, loomed somberly on the level. "But if they'd ever get evidence that we done it—"

Trevison laughed lowly, with a grim humor that made Levins look sharply at him. "That abandoned

pueblo on the creek near your shack is built like a fortress, Levins."

"What in hell has this job got to do with that dobie pile?" questioned the other.

"Plenty. Oh, you're curious, now. But I'm going to keep you guessing for a day or two."

"You'll go loco—give you time," scoffed Levins.

"Somebody else will go crazy when this stuff lets go," laughed Trevison, tapping his pockets.

Levins snickered. They trailed the reins over the heads of their horses, and walked swiftly toward the corrugated iron building. Halting in the shadow of it, they held a hurried conference, and then separated, Trevison going toward the engine, already set up, with its flimsy roof covering it, and working around it for a few minutes, then darting from it to a small building filled with tools and stores, and to a pile of machinery and supplies stacked against the wall of the butte. They worked rapidly, elusive as shadows in the deep gloom of the wall of the butte, and when their work was completed they met in the full glare of the moonlight near the corrugated iron building and whispered again.

Lashing her horse over a strange trail, Rosalind Benham came to a thicket of gnarled fir-balsam and scrub oak that barred her way completely. She had ridden hard and her horse breathed heavily during the short time she spent looking about her. Her own breath was coming sharply, sobbing in her throat, but it was more from excitement than from the hazard

and labor of the ride, for she had paid little attention to the trail, beyond giving the horse direction, trusting to the animal's wisdom, accepting the risks as a matter-of-course. It was the imminence of violence that had aroused her, the portent of a lawless deed that might result in tragedy. She had told Mrs. Levins that she was doing this thing for *her* sake, but she knew better. She *did* consider the woman, but she realized that her dominating passion was for the grim-faced young man who, discouraged, driven to desperation by the force of circumstances — just or not — was fighting for what he considered were his rights — the accumulated results of ten years of exile and work. She wanted to save him from this deed, from the results of it, even though there was nothing but condemnation in her heart for him because of it.

"To the left of the thicket is a slope," Mrs. Levins had told her. She stopped only long enough to get her bearings, and at her panting, "Go!" the horse leaped. They were at the crest of the slope quickly, facing the bottom, yawning, deep, dark. She shut her eyes as the horse took it, leaning back to keep from falling over the animal's head, holding tightly to the pommel of the saddle. They got down, someway, and when she felt the level under them she lashed the horse again, and urged him around a shoulder of the precipitous wall that loomed above her, frowning and somber.

She heard a horse whinny as she flashed past the shoulder, her own beast tearing over the level with great catlike leaps, but she did not look back, straining her eyes to peer into the darkness along the wall

of the butte for sight of the buildings and machinery.

She saw them soon after passing the shoulder, and exclaimed her thanks sharply.

"All set," said one of the shadowy figures near the corrugated iron building. A match flared, was applied to a stick of punk in the hands of each man, and again they separated, each running, applying the glowing wand here and there.

Trevison's work took him longest, and when he leaped from the side of a mound of supplies Levins was already running back toward the shoulder where they had left their horses. They joined, then split apart, their weapons leaping into their hands, for they heard the rapid drumming of horse's hoofs.

"They're coming!" panted Trevison, his jaws setting as he plunged on toward the shoulder of the butte. "Run low and duck at the flash of their guns!" he warned Levins.

A wide swoop brought the oncoming horse around the shoulder of the butte into full view. As the moonlight shone, momentarily, on the rider, Trevison cried out, hoarsely:

"God, it's a woman!"

He leaped, at the words, out of the shadow of the butte into the moonlight of the level, straight into the path of the running horse, which at sight of him slid, reared and came to a halt, snorting and trembling. Trevison had recognized the girl; he flung himself at the horse, muttering: "Dynamite!" seized the beast by the bridle, forced its head around despite the girl's

objections and incoherent pleadings—some phrases of which sank home, but were disregarded.

“Don’t!” she cried, fiercely, as he struck the animal with his fist to accelerate its movements. She was still crying to him, wildly, hysterically, as he got the animal’s head around and slapped it sharply on the hip, his pistol crashing at its heels.

The frightened animal clattered over the back trail, Trevison running after it. He reached Nigger, flung himself into the saddle, and raced after Levins, who was already far down the level, following Rosalind’s horse. At a turn in the butte he came upon them both, their horses halted, the girl berating Levins, the man laughing lowly at her.

“Don’t!” she cried to Trevison as he rode up. “Please, Trevison—don’t let *that* happen! It’s criminal; it’s outlawry!”

“Too late,” he said grimly, and rode close to her to grasp the bridle of her horse. Standing thus, they waited—an age, to the girl, in reality only a few seconds. Then the deep, solemn silence of the night was split by a hollow roar, which echoed and re-echoed as though a thousand thunder storms had centered over their heads. A vivid flash, extended, effulgent, lit the sky, the earth rocked, the canyon walls towering above them seemed to sway and reel drunkenly. The girl covered her face with her hands. Another blast smote the night, reverberating on the heels of the other; there followed another and another, so quickly that they blended; then another, with a distinct interval between. Then a breathless, unreal calm, through which distant

echoes rumbled; then a dead silence, shattered at last by a heavy, distant clatter, as though myriad big hailstones were falling on a pavement. And then another silence—the period of reeling calm after an earthquake.

"O God!" wailed the girl; "it is horrible!"

"You've got to get out of here—the whole of Manti will be here in a few minutes! Come on!"

He urged Nigger farther down the canyon, and up a rocky slope that brought them to the mesa. The girl was trembling, her breath coming gaspingly. He faced her as they came to a halt, pityingly, with a certain dogged resignation in his eyes.

"What brought you here? Who told you we were here?" he asked, gruffly.

"It doesn't matter!" She faced him defiantly. "You have outraged the laws of your country tonight! I hope you are punished for it!"

He laughed, derisively. "Well, you've seen; you know. Go and inform your friends. What I have done I did after long deliberation in which I considered fully the consequences to myself. Levins wasn't concerned in it, so you don't need to mention his name. Your ranch is in that direction, Miss Benham." He pointed southeastward, Nigger lunged, caught his stride in two or three jumps, and fled toward the southwest. His rider did not hear the girl's voice; it was drowned in the clatter of hoofs as he and Levins rode.

CHAPTER XXI

ANOTHER WOMAN RIDES

TREVISION rode in to town the next morning. On his way he went to the edge of the butte overlooking the level, and looked down upon the wreck and ruin he had caused. Masses of twisted steel and iron met his gaze; the level was littered with debris, which a gang of men under Carson was engaged in clearing away; a great section of the butte had been blasted out, earth, rocks, sand, had slid down upon much of the wreckage, partly burying it. The utter havoc of the scene brought a fugitive smile to his lips.

He saw Carson waving a hand to him, and he answered the greeting, noting as he did so that Corrigan stood at a little distance behind Carson, watching. Trevison did not give him a second look, wheeling Nigger and sending him toward Manti at a slow lope. As he rode away, Corrigan called to Carson.

"Your friend didn't seem to be much surprised."

Carson turned, making a grimace while his back was yet toward Corrigan, but grinning broadly when he faced around.

"Didn't he now? I wasn't noticin'. But, begorra, how c'ud he be surprised, whin the whole domned

country was rocked out av its bed be the blast! Wud ye be expictin' him to fall over in a faint on beholdin' the wreck?"

"Not he," said Corrigan, coldly; "he's got too much nerve for that."

"Ain't he, now!" Carson looked guilelessly at the other. "Wud ye be havin' anny idee who done it?"

Corrigan's eyes narrowed. "No," he said shortly, and turned away.

Trevison's appearance in Manti created a stir. He had achieved a double result by his deed, for besides destroying the property and making it impossible for Corrigan to resume work for a considerable time, he had caused Manti's interest to center upon him sharply, having shocked into the town's consciousness a conception of the desperate battle that was being waged at its doors. For Manti had viewed the devastated butte early that morning, and had come away, seething with curiosity to get a glimpse of the man whom everybody secretly suspected of being the cause of it. Many residents of the town had known Trevison before—in half an hour after his arrival he was known to all. Public opinion was heavily in his favor and many approving comments were heard.

"I ain't blamin' him a heap," said a man in the *Belmont*. "If things is as you say they are, there ain't much more that a *man* could do!"

"The laws is made for the guys with the coin an' the pull," said another, vindictively.

"An' dynamite ain't carin' who's usin' it," said another, slyly. Both grinned. The universal sympathy

for the "under dog" oppressed by Justice perverted or controlled, had here found expression.

It was so all over Manti. Admiring glances followed Trevison; though he said no word concerning the incident; nor could any man have said, judging from the expression of his face, that he was elated. He had business in Manti—he completed it, and when he was ready to go he got on Nigger and loped out of town.

"That man's nerve is as cold as a naked Eskimo at the North Pole," commented an admirer. "If I'd done a thing like that I'd be layin' low to see if any evidence would turn up against me."

"I reckon there ain't a heap of evidence," laughed his neighbor. "I expect everybody knows he done it, but knowin' an' provin' is two different things."

A mile out of town Trevison met Corrigan. The latter halted his horse when he saw Trevison and waited for him to come up. The big man's face wore an ugly, significant grin.

"You did a complete job," he said, eyeing the other narrowly. "And there doesn't seem to be any evidence. But look out! When a thing like that happens there's always somebody around to see it, and if I can get evidence against you I'll send you up for it!"

He noted a slight quickening of Trevison's eyes at his mention of a witness, and a fierce exultation leaped within him.

Trevison laughed, looking the other fairly between the eyes. Rosalind Benham hadn't informed on him. However, the day was not yet gone.

"Get your evidence before you try to do any bluffing," he challenged. He spurred Nigger on, not looking back at his enemy.

Corrigan rode to the laborers' tents, where he talked for a time with the cook. In the mess tent he stood with his back to a rough, pine-topped table, his hands on its edge. The table had not yet been cleared from the morning meal, for the cook had been interested in the explosion. He tried to talk of it with Corrigan, but the latter adroitly directed the conversation otherwise. The cook would have said they had a pleasant talk. Corrigan seemed very companionable this morning. He laughed a little; he listened attentively when the cook talked. After a while Corrigan fumbled in his pockets. Not finding a cigar, he looked eloquently at the cook's pipe, in the latter's mouth, belching much smoke.

"Not a single cigar," he said. "I'm dying for a taste of tobacco."

The cook took his pipe from his mouth and wiped the stem hastily on a sleeve. "If you don't mind I've been suckin' on it," he said, extending it.

"I wouldn't deprive you of it for the world." Corrigan shifted his position, looked down at the table and smiled. "Luck, eh?" he said, picking up a black brier that lay on the table behind him. "Got plenty of tobacco?"

The cook dove for a box in a corner and returned with a cloth sack, bulging. He watched while Corrigan filled the pipe, and grinned while his guest was lighting it.

"Carson'll be ravin' today for forgettin' his pipe. He must have left it layin' on the table this mornin'—him bein' in such a rush to get down to the explosion."

"It's Carson's, eh?" Corrigan surveyed it with casual interest. "Well," after taking a few puffs "—I'll say for Carson that he knows how to take care of it."

He left shortly afterward, laying the pipe on the table where he had found it. Five minutes later he was in Judge Lindman's presence, leaning over the desk toward the other.

"I want you to issue a warrant for Patrick Carson. I want him brought in here for examination. Charge him with being an accessory before the fact, or anything that seems to fit the case. But throw him into the cooler—and keep him there until he talks. He knows who broke into the dynamite shed, and therefore he knows who did the dynamiting. He's friendly with Trevison, and if we can make him admit he saw Trevison at the shed, we've got the goods. He warned Trevison the other day, when I had the deputies lined up at the butte, and I found his pipe this morning near the door of the dynamite shed. We'll make him talk, damn him!"

Banker Braman had closed the door between the front and rear rooms, pulled down the shades of the windows, lighted the kerosene lamp, and by its wavering flicker was surveying his reflection in the small mirror affixed to one of the walls of the building. He was

pleased, as the fatuous self-complacence of his look indicated, and carefully, almost fastidiously dressed, and he could not deny himself this last look into the mirror, even though he was now five minutes late with his appointment. The five minutes threatened to become ten, for, in adjusting his tie-pin it slipped from his fingers, struck the floor and vanished, as though an evil fate had gobbled it.

He searched for it frenziedly, cursing lowly, but none the less viciously. It was quite by accident that when his patience was strained almost to the breaking point, he struck his hand against a board that formed part of the partition between his building and the courthouse next door, and tore a huge chunk of skin from the knuckles. He paid little attention to the injury, however, for the agitating of the board disclosed the glittering recreant, and he pounced upon it with the precision of a hawk upon its prey, snarling triumphantly.

"I'll nail that damned board up, some day!" he threatened. But he knew he wouldn't, for by lying on the floor and pulling the board out a trifle, he could get a clear view of the interior of the courthouse, and could hear quite plainly, in spite of the presence of a wooden box resting against the wall on the other side. And some of the things that Braman had already heard through the medium of the loose board were really interesting, not to say instructive, to him.

He was ten minutes late in keeping his appointment. He might have been even later without being in danger of receiving the censure he deserved. For the lady

received him in a loose wrapper and gracefully disordered hair, a glance at which made Braman gasp in unfeigned admiration.

"What's this?" he demanded with a pretense of fatherly severity, which he imagined became him very well in the presence of women. "Not ready yet, Mrs. Harvey?"

The woman waved him to a chair with unsmiling unconcern; dropped into another, crossed her legs and leaned back in her chair, her hands folded across the back of her head, her sleeves, wide and flaring, sliding down below her elbows. She caught Braman's burning stare of interest in this revelation of negligence, and smiled at him in faint derision.

"I'm tired, Croft. I've changed my mind about going to the First Merchants' Ball. I'd much rather sit here and chin you—if you don't mind."

"Not a bit!" hastily acquiesced the banker. "In fact, I like the idea of staying here much better. It is more private, you know." He grinned significantly, but the woman's smile of faint derision changed merely to irony, which held steadily, making Braman's cheeks glow crimson.

"Well, then," she laughed, exulting in her power over him; "let's get busy. What do you want to chin about?"

"I'll tell you after I've wet my whistle," said the banker, gayly. "Im dry as a bone in the middle of the Sahara desert!"

"I'll take mine 'straight,'" she laughed.

Braman rang a bell. A waiter with glasses and a

bottle appeared, entered, was paid, and departed, grinning without giving the banker any change from a ten dollar bill.

The woman laughed immoderately at Braman's wolfish snarl.

"Be a sport, Croft. Don't begrudge a poor waiter a few honestly earned dollars!"

"And now, what has the loose-board telephone told you?" she asked, two hours later when flushed of face from frequent attacks on the bottle—Braman rather more flushed than she—they relaxed in their chairs after a tilt at poker in which the woman had been the victor.

"You're sure you don't care for Trevison any more—that you're only taking his end of this because of what he's been to you in the past?" demanded the banker, looking suspiciously at her.

"He told me he didn't love me any more. I couldn't want him after that, could I?"

"I should think not." Braman's eyes glowed with satisfaction. But he hesitated, yielding when she smiled at him. "Damn it, I'd knife Corrigan for you!" he vowed, recklessly.

"Save Trevison—that's all I ask. Tell me what you heard."

"Corrigan suspects Trevison of blowing up the stuff at the butte—as everybody does, of course. He's determined to get evidence against him. He found Carson's pipe at the door of the dynamite shed this morning. Carson is a friend of Trevison's. Corrigan is going to have Judge Lindman issue a warrant

for the arrest of Carson — on some charge — and they're going to jail Carson until he talks."

The woman cursed profanely, sharply. "That's Corrigan's idea of a square deal. He promised me that no harm should come to Trevison." She got up and walked back and forth in the room, Braman watching her with passion lying naked in his eyes, his lips loose and moist.

She stopped in front of him, finally. "Go home, Croft — there's a good boy. I want to think."

"That's cruelty to animals," he laughed in a strained voice. "But I'll go," he added at signs of displeasure on her face. "Can I see you tomorrow night?"

"I'll let you know." She held the door open for him, and permitted him to take her hand for an instant. He squeezed it hotly, the woman making a grimace of repugnance as she closed the door.

Swiftly she changed from her loose gown to a simple, short-skirted affair, slipped on boots, a felt hat, gloves. Leaving the light burning, she slipped out into the hall and called to the waiter who had served her and Braman. By rewarding him generously she procured a horse, and a few minutes later she emerged from the building by a rear door, mounting the animal and sending it clattering out into the night.

Twice she lost her way and rode miles before she recovered her sense of direction, and when she finally pulled the beast to a halt at the edge of the Diamond K ranchhouse gallery, midnight was not far away. The ranchhouse was dark. She smothered a gasp of disappointment as she crossed the gallery floor. She was

about to hammer on the door when it swung open and Trevison stepped out, peered closely at her and laughed shortly.

"It's you, eh?" he said. "I thought I told you—"

She winced at his tone, but it did not lessen her concern for him.

"It isn't that, Trev! And I don't care how you treat me—I deserve it! But I can't see them punish you—for what you did last night!" She felt him start, his muscles stiffen.

"Something has turned up, then. You came to warn me? What is it?"

"You were seen last night! They're going to arrest—"

"So she squealed, did she?" he interrupted. He laughed lowly, bitterly, with a vibrant disappointment that wrung the woman's heart with sympathy. But her brain quickly grasped the significance of his words, and longing dulled her sense of honor. It was too good an opportunity to miss. "Bah! I expected it. She told me she would. I was a fool to dream otherwise!" He turned on Hester and grasped her by the shoulders, and her flesh deadened under his fingers.

"Did she tell Corrigan?"

"Yes." The woman told the lie courageously, looking straight into his eyes, though she shrank at the fire that came into them as he released her and laughed.

"Where did you get your information?" His voice was suddenly sullen and cold.

"From Braman."

He started, and laughed in humorous derision.

"Braman and Corrigan are blood brothers in this deal. You must have captivated the little sneak completely to make him lose his head like that!"

"I did it for you, Trev—for you. Don't you see? Oh, I despise the little beast! But he dropped a hint one day when I was in the bank, and I deliberately snared him, hoping I might be able to gain information that would benefit you. And I have, Trev!" she added, trembling with a hope that his hasty judgment might result to her advantage. And how near she had come to mentioning Carson's name! If Trevison had waited for just another second before interrupting her! Fortune had played favorably into her hands tonight!

"For you, boy," she said, slipping close to him, sinuously, whispering, knowing the "she" he had mentioned *must* be Rosalind Benham. "Old friends are best, boy. At least they can be depended upon not to betray one. Trev; let me help you! I can, and I will! Why, I love you, Trev! And you need me, to help you fight these people who are trying to ruin you!"

"You don't understand." Trevison's voice was cold and passionless. "It seems I can't *make* you understand. I'm grateful for what you have done for me tonight—very grateful. But I can't live a lie, woman. I don't love you!"

"But you love a woman who has delivered you into the hands of your enemies," she moaned.

"I can't help it," he declared hoarsely. "I don't deny it. I would love her if she sent me to the gallows, and stood there, watching me die!"

The woman bowed her head, and dropped her hands listlessly to her sides. In this instant she was thinking almost the same words that Rosalind Benham had murmured on her ride to Blakeley's, when she had discovered Trevison's identity: "I wonder if Hester Keyes knows what she has missed."

CHAPTER XXII

A MAN ERRS — AND PAYS

FOR a time Trevison stood on the gallery, watching the woman as she faded into the darkness toward Manti, and then he laughed mirthlessly and went into the house, emerging with a rifle and saddle. A few minutes later he rode Nigger out of the corral and headed him southwestward. Shortly after midnight he was at the door of Levins' cabin. The latter grinned with feline humor after they held a short conference.

"That's right," he said; "you don't need any of the boys to help you pull *that* off — they'd mebbe go to actin' foolish an' give the whole snap away. Besides, I'm a heap tickled to be let in on that sort of a jam-boree!" There followed an interval, during which his grin faded. "So she peached on you, eh? She told my woman she wouldn't. That's a woman, ain't it? How's a man to tell about 'em?"

"That's a secret of my own that I am not ready to let you in on. Don't tell your wife where you are going *tonight*."

"I ain't reckonin' to. I'll be with you in a jiffy!" He vanished into the cabin, reappeared, ran to the stable, and rode out to meet Trevison. Together they were swallowed up by the plains.

At eight o'clock in the morning Corrigan came out of the dining-room of his hotel and stopped at the cigar counter. He filled his case, lit one, and stood for a moment with an elbow on the glass of the show case, smoking thoughtfully.

"That was quite an accident you had at your mine. Have you any idea who did it?" asked the clerk, watching him furtively.

Corrigan glanced at the man, his lips curling.

"You might guess," he said through his teeth.

"That fellow Trevison is a bad actor," continued the clerk. "And say," he went on, confidentially; "not that I want to make you feel bad, but the majority of the people of this town are standing with him in this deal. They think you are not giving the land-owners a square deal. Not that I'm 'knocking' *you*," the clerk denied, flushing at the dark look Corrigan threw him. "That's merely what I hear. Personally, I'm for you. This town needs men like you, and it can get along without fellows like Trevison."

"Thank you," smiled Corrigan, disgusted with the man, but feeling that it might be well to cultivate such ingratiating interest. "Have a cigar."

"I'll go you. Yes, sir," he added, when he had got the weed going; "this town can get along without any Trevisons. These sagebrush rummies out here give me a pain. What this country needs is less brute force and more brains!" He drew his shoulders erect as though convinced that he was not lacking in the particular virtue to which he had referred.

"You are right," smiled Corrigan, mildly. "Brains

are all important. A hotel clerk must be well supplied. I presume you see and hear a great many things that other people miss seeing and hearing." Corrigan thought this thermometer of public opinion might have other information.

"You've said it! We've got to keep our wits about us. There's very little escapes us." He leered at Corrigan's profile. "That's a swell Moll in number eleven, ain't it?"

"What do you know about her?" Corrigan's face was inexpressive.

"Oh say now!" The clerk guffawed close to Corrigan's ear without making the big man wink an eyelash. "You don't mean to tell me that you ain't *on*! I saw you steer to her room one night—the night she came here. And once or twice, since. But of course us hotel clerks don't see anything! She is down on the register as Mrs. Harvey. But say! You don't see any married women running around the country dressed like her!"

"She may be a widow."

"Well, yes, maybe she might. But she shows speed, don't she?" He whispered. "You're a pretty good friend of mine, now, and maybe if I'd give you a tip you'd throw something in my way later on—eh?"

"What?"

"Oh, you might start a hotel here—or something. And I'm thinking of blowing this joint. This town's booming, and it can stand a swell hotel in a few months."

"You're on—if I build a hotel. Shoot!"

The clerk leaned closer, whispering: "She receives other men. You're not the only one."

"Who?"

The clerk laughed, and made a funnel of one hand. "The banker across the street—Braman."

Corrigan bit his cigar in two, and slowly spat that which was left in his mouth into a cuspidor. He contrived to smile, though it cost him an effort, and his hands were clenched.

"How many times has he been here?"

"Oh, several."

"When was he here last?"

"Last night." The clerk laughed. "Looked half stewed when he left. Kinda hectic, too. Him and her must have had a tiff, for he left early. And after he'd gone—right away after—she sent one of the waiters out for a horse."

"Which way did she go?"

"West—I watched her; she went the back way, from here."

Corrigan smiled and went out. The expression of his face was such as to cause the clerk to mutter, dazedly: "He didn't seem to be a whole lot interested. I guess I must have sized him up wrong."

Corrigan stopped at his office in the bank, nodding curtly to Braman. Shortly afterward he got up and went to the courthouse. He had ordered Judge Lindman to issue a warrant for Carson the previous morning, and had intended to see that it was served. But a press of other matters had occupied his attention until late in the night.

He tried the front door of the courthouse, to find it locked. The rear door was also locked. He tried the windows—all were fastened securely. Thinking the Judge still sleeping he went back to his office and spent an hour going over some correspondence. At the end of that time he visited the courthouse again. Angered, he went around to the side and burst the flimsy door in, standing in the opening, glowering, for the Judge's cot was empty, and the Judge nowhere to be seen.

Corrigan stalked through the building, cursing. He examined the cot, and discovered that it had been slept in. The Judge must have risen early. Obviously, there was nothing to do but to wait. Corrigan did that, impatiently. For a long time he sat in the chair at his desk, watching Braman, studying him, scowling, rage in his heart. "If he's up to any dirty work, I'll choke him until his tongue hangs out a yard!" was a mental threat that he repeated many times. "But he's just mush-headed over the woman, I guess—he's that kind of a fool!"

At ten o'clock Corrigan jumped on his horse and rode out to the butte where the laborers were working, clearing away the debris from the explosion. No one there had seen Judge Lindman. Corrigan rode back to town, fuming with rage. Finding some of the deputies he sent them out to search for the Judge. One by one they came in and reported their failure. At six-thirty, after the arrival of the evening train from Dry Bottom, Corrigan was sitting at his desk, his face black with wrath, reading for the third or fourth time

a letter that he had spread out on the desk before him:

"MR. JEFFERSON CORRIGAN:

I feel it is necessary for me to take a short rest. Recent excitement in Manti has left me very nervous and unstrung. I shall be away from Manti for about two weeks, I think. During my absence any pending litigation must be postponed, of course."

The letter was signed by Judge Lindman, and postmarked "Dry Bottom."

Corrigan got up after a while and stuffed the letter into a pocket. He went out, and when he returned, Braman had gone out also—to supper, Corrigan surmised. When the banker came in an hour later, Corrigan was still seated at his desk. The banker smiled at him, and Corrigan motioned to him.

Corrigan's voice was silky. "Where were you last night, Braman?"

The banker's face whitened; his thoughts became confused, but instantly cleared when he observed from the expression of the big man's face that the question was, apparently, a casual one. But he drew his breath tremulously. One could never be sure of Corrigan.

"I spent the night here—in the back room."

"Then you didn't see the Judge last night—or hear him?"

"No."

Corrigan drew the Judge's letter from the pocket and passed it over to Braman, watching his face stead-

ily as he read. He saw a quick stain appear in the banker's cheeks, and his own lips tightened.

The banker coughed before he spoke. "Wasn't that a rather abrupt leave-taking?"

"Yes — rather," said Corrigan, dryly. "You didn't hear him walking about during the night?"

"No."

"You're rather a heavy sleeper, eh? There is only a thin board partition between this building and the courthouse."

"He must have left after daylight. Of course, any noise he might have made after that I wouldn't have noticed."

"No, of course not," said Corrigan, passionlessly. "Well—he's gone." He seemed to have dismissed the matter from his mind and Braman sighed with relief. But he watched Corrigan narrowly during the remainder of the time he stayed in the office, and when he went out, Braman shook a vindictive fist at his back.

"Worry, damn you!" he sneered. "I don't know what was in Judge Lindman's mind, but I hope he never comes back! That will help to repay you for that knockdown!"

Corrigan went over to the *Castle* and ate supper. He was preoccupied and deliberate, for he was trying to weave a complete fabric out of the threads of Braman's visits to Hester Harvey; Hester's ride westward, and Judge Lindman's abrupt departure. He had a feeling that they were in some way connected.

At a little after seven he finished his meal, went

upstairs and knocked at the door of Hester Harvey's room. He stepped inside when she opened the door, and stood, both hands in the pockets of his trousers, looking at her with a smile of repressed malignance.

"Nice night for a ride, wasn't it?" he said, his lips parting a very little to allow the words to filter through.

The woman flashed a quick, inquiring look at him, saw the passion in his eyes, the gleam of malevolent antagonism, and she set herself against it. For her talk with Trevison last night had convinced her of the futility of hope. She had gone out of his life as a commonplace incident slips into the oblivion of yesteryear. Worse—he had refused to recall it. It hurt her, this knowledge—his rebuff. It had aroused cold, wanton passions in her—she had become a woman who did not care. She met Corrigan's gaze with a look of defiant mockery.

"Swell. I enjoyed every minute of it. Won't you sit down?"

He held himself back, grinning coldly, for the woman's look had goaded him to fury.

"No," he said; "I'll stand. I won't be here a minute. You saw Trevison last night, eh? You warned him that I was going to have Carson arrested." He had hazarded this guess, for it had seemed to him that it must be the solution to the mystery, and when he caught the quick, triumphant light in the woman's eyes at his words he knew he had not erred.

"Yes," she said; "I saw him, and I told him—what Braman told me." She saw his eyes glitter and she

laughed harshly. "That's what you wanted to know, isn't it, Jeff—what Braman told me? Well, you know it. I knew you couldn't play square with me. You thought you could dupe me—*again*, didn't you? Well, you didn't, for I snared Braman and pumped him dry. He's kept me posted on your movements; and his little board telephone— Ha, ha! that makes you squirm, doesn't it? But it was all wasted effort—Trevison won't have me—he's through. And I'm through. I'm not going to try any more. I'm going back East, after I get rested. You fight it out with Trevison. But I warn you, he'll beat you—and I wish he would! As for that beast, Braman, I wish— Ah, let him go, Jeff," she advised, noting the cold fury in his eyes.

"That's all right," he said with a dry laugh. "You and Braman have done well. It hasn't done me any harm, and so we'll forget about it. What do you say to having a drink—and a talk. As in old times, eh?" He seemed suddenly to have conquered his passion, but the queer twitching of his lips warned the woman, and when he essayed to move toward her, smiling pallidly, she darted to the far side of a stand near the center of the room, pulled out a drawer, produced a small revolver and leveled it at him, her eyes wide and glittering with menace.

"Stay where you are, Jeff!" she ordered. "There's murder in your heart, and I know it. But I don't intend to be the victim. I'll shoot if you come one step nearer!"

He smirked at her, venomously. "All right," he

said. "You're wise. But get out of town on the next train."

"I'll go when I get ready — you can't scare me. Let me alone or I'll go to Rosalind Benham and let her in on the whole scheme."

"Yes you will — not," he laughed. "If I know anything about you, you won't do anything that would give Miss Benham to Trevison."

"That's right; I'd rather see her married to you — that would be the refinement of cruelty!"

He laughed sneeringly and stepped out of the door. Waiting a short time, the woman heard his step in the hall. Then she darted to the door, locked it, and leaned against it, panting.

"I've done it now," she murmured. "Braman — Well, it serves him right!"

Corrigan stopped in the barroom and got a drink. Then he walked to the front door and stood in it for an instant, finally stepping down into the street. Across the street in the banking room he saw a thin streak of light gleaming through a crevice in the doorway that led from the banking room to the rear. The light told him that Braman was in the rear room. Selecting a moment when the street in his vicinity was deserted, Corrigan deliberately crossed, standing for a moment in the shadow of the bank building, looking around him. Then he slipped around the building and tapped cautiously on the rear door. An instant later he was standing inside the room, his back against the door.

Braman, arrayed as he had been the night before, had opened the door. He had been just ready to go when he heard Corrigan's knock.

"Going out, Croft?" said Corrigan pleasantly, eyeing the other intently. "All lit up, too! You're getting to be a gay dog, lately."

There was nothing in Corrigan's bantering words to bring on that sudden qualm of sickening fear that seized the banker. He knew it was his guilt that had done it—guilt and perhaps a dread of Corrigan's rage if he *should* learn of his duplicity. But that word "lately"! If it had been uttered with any sort of an accent he might have been suspicious. But it had come with the bantering ring of the others, with no hint of special significance. And Braman was reassured.

"Yes, I'm going out." He turned to the mirror on the wall. "I'm getting rather stale, hanging around here so much."

"That's right, Croft. Have a good time. How much money is there in the safe?"

"Two or three thousand dollars." The banker turned from the glass. "Want some? Ha, ha!" he laughed at the other's short nod; "there are other gay dogs, I guess! How much do you want?"

"All you've got?"

"All! Jehoshaphat! You must have a big deal on tonight!"

"Yes, big," said Corrigan evenly. "Get it."

He followed the banker into the banking room, carefully closing the door behind him, so that the light from the rear room could not penetrate. "That's all

right," he reassured the banker as the latter noticed the action; "this isn't a public matter."

He stuffed his pockets with the money the banker gave him, and when the other tried to close the door of the safe he interposed a restraining hand, laughing:

"Leave it open, Croft. It's empty now, and a cracksmen trying to get into it would ruin a perfectly good safe, for nothing."

"That's right."

They went into the rear room again, Corrigan last, closing the door behind him. Braman went again to the glass, Corrigan standing silently behind him.

Standing before the glass, the banker was seized with a repetition of the sickening fear that had oppressed him at Corrigan's words upon his entrance. It seemed to him that there was a sinister significance behind Corrigan's present silence. A tension came between them, portentous of evil. Braman shivered, but the silence held. The banker tried to think of something to say—his thoughts were rioting in chaos, a dumb, paralyzing terror had seized him, his lips stuck together, the facial muscles refusing their office. He dropped his hands to his sides and stared into the glass, noting the ghastly pallor that had come over his face—the dull, whitish yellow of muddy marble. He could not turn, his legs were quivering. He knew it was conscience—only that. And yet Corrigan's ominous silence continued. And now he caught his breath with a shuddering gasp, for he saw Corrigan's face reflected in the glass, looking over his shoulder—

a mirthless smirk on it, the eyes cold, and dancing with a merciless and cunning purpose. While he watched, he saw Corrigan's lips open:

"Where's the board telephone, Braman?"

The banker wheeled, then. He tried to scream—the sound died in a gasping gurgle as Corrigan leaped and throttled him. Later, he fought to loosen the grip of the iron fingers at his throat, twisting, squirming, threshing about the room in his agony. The grip held, tightened. When the banker was quite still Corrigan put out the light, went into the banking room, where he scattered the papers and books in the safe all around the room. Then he twisted the lock off the door, using an iron bar that he had noticed in a corner when he had come in, and stepped out into the shadow of the building.

CHAPTER XXIII

FIRST PRINCIPLES

JUDGE LINDMAN shivered, though a merciless, blighting sun beat down on the great stone ledge that spread in front of the opening, smothering him with heat waves that eddied in and out, and though the interior of the low-ceilinged chamber pulsed with the fetid heat sucked in from the plains generations before. The adobe walls, gray-black in the subdued light, were dry as powder and crumbling in spots, the stone floor was exposed in many places; there was a strange, sickening odor, as though the naked, perspiring bodies of inhabitants in ages past had soaked the walls and floor with the man-scent, and intervening years of disuse had mingled their musty breath with it. But for the presence of the serene-faced, steady-eyed young man who leaned carelessly against the wall outside, whose shoulder and profile he could see, the Judge might have yielded completely to the overpowering conviction that he was dreaming, and that his adventures of the past twelve hours were horrors of his imagination. But he knew from the young man's presence at the door that his experience had been real enough, and the knowledge kept his brain out of the threatening chaos.

Some time during the night he had awakened on

his cot in the rear room of the courthouse to hear a cold, threatening voice warning him to silence. He had recognized the voice, as he had recognized it once before, under similar conditions. He had been gagged, his hands tied behind him. Then he had been lifted, carried outside, placed on the back of a horse, in front of his captor, and borne away in the darkness. They had ridden many miles before the horse came to a halt and he was lifted down. Then he had been forced to ascend a sharp slope; he could hear the horse clattering up behind them. But he had not been able to see anything in the darkness, though he felt he was walking along the edge of a cliff. The walk had ended abruptly, when his captor had forced him into his present quarters with a gruff admonition to sleep. Sleep had come hard, and he had done little of it, napping merely, sitting on the stone floor, his back against the wall, most of the time watching his captor. He had talked some, asking questions which his captor ignored. Then a period of oblivion had come, and he had awakened to the sunshine. For an hour he had sat where he was, looking out at his captor and blinking at the brilliant sunshine. But he had asked no questions since awakening, for he had become convinced of the meaning of all this. But he was intensely curious, now.

"Where have you brought me?" he demanded of his jailor.

"You're awake, eh?" Trevison grinned as he wheeled and looked in at his prisoner. "This," he waved a hand toward the ledge and its surroundings, "is an Indian pueblo, long deserted. It makes an

admirable prison, Judge. It is also a sort of a fort. There is only one vulnerable point—the slope we came up last night. I'll take you on a tour of examination, if you like. And then you must return here, to stay until you disclose the whereabouts of the original land record."

The Judge paled, partly from anger, partly from a fear that gripped him.

"This is an outrage, Trevison! This is America!"

"Is it?" The young man smiled imperturbably. "There have been times during the past few weeks when I doubted it, very much. It *is* America, though, but it is a part of America that the average American sees little of—that he knows little of. As little, let us say, as he knows of the weird application of its laws—as applied by *some* judges." He smiled as Lindman winced. "I have given up hoping to secure justice in the regular way, and so we are in the midst of a reversion to first principles—which may lead us to our goal."

"What do you mean?"

"That I *must* have the original record, Judge, I mean to have it."

"I deny—"

"Yes—of course. Deny, if you like. We shan't argue. Do you want to explore the place? There will be plenty of time for talk."

He stepped aside as the Judge came out, and grinned broadly as he caught the Judge's shrinking look at a rifle he took up as he turned. It had been propped against the wall at his side. He swung it to the hollow

of his left elbow. "Your knowledge of firearms convinces you that you can't run as fast as a rifle bullet, doesn't it, Judge?"

The Judge's face indicated that he understood.

"Ever make the acquaintance of an Indian pueblo, Judge?"

"No. I came West only a year ago, and I have kept pretty close to my work."

"Well, you'll feel pretty intimate with this one by the time you leave it—if you're obstinate," laughed Trevison. He stood still and watched the Judge. The latter was staring hard at his surroundings, perhaps with something of the awed reverence that overtakes the tourist when for the first time he views an ancient ruin.

The pueblo seemed to be nothing more than a jumble of adobe boxes piled in an indiscriminate heap on a gigantic stone level surmounting the crest of a hill. A sheer rock wall, perhaps a hundred feet in height, descended to the surrounding slopes; the latter sweeping down to join the plains. A dust, light, dry, and feathery lay thickly on the adobe boxes on the surrounding ledge on the slopes, like a gray ash sprinkled from a giant sifter. Cactus and yucca dotted the slopes, thorny, lancelike, repellent; lava, dull, hinting of volcanic fire, filled crevices and depressions, and huge blocks of stone, detached in the progress of disintegration, were scattered about.

"It has taken ages for this to happen!" the Judge heard himself murmuring.

Trevison laughed lowly. "So it has, Judge. Makes

you think of your school days, doesn't it? You hardly remember it, though. You have a hazy sort of recollection of a print of a pueblo in a geography, or in a geological textbook, but at the time you were more interested in Greek roots, the Alps, Louis Quinze, the heroes of mythology, or something equally foreign, and you forgot that your own country might hold something of interest for you. But the history of these pueblo towns must be pretty interesting, if one could get at it. All that I have heard of it are some pretty weird legends. There can be no doubt, I suppose, that the people who inhabited these communal houses had laws to govern them—and judges to apply the laws. And I presume that then, as now, the judges were swayed by powerful influences in—”

The Judge glared at his tormentor. The latter laughed.

“It is reasonable to presume, too,” he went on, “that in some cases the judges rendered some pretty raw decisions. And carrying the supposition further, we may believe that then, as now, the poor downtrodden proletariat got rather hot under the collar. There are always some hot-tempered fools among all classes and races that do, you know. They simply can't stand the feel of the iron heel of the oppressor. Can you picture a hot-tempered fool of that tribe abducting a judge of the court of his people and carrying him away to some uninhabited place, there to let him starve until he decided to do the right thing?”

“Starve!” gasped the Judge.

“The chambers and tunnels connecting these com-

munal houses—they look like mud boxes, don't they, Judge? And there isn't a soul in any of them—nor a bite to eat! As I was about to remark, the chambers and tunnels and the passages connecting these places are pretty bare and cheerless—if we except scorpions, horned toads, centipedes, tarantulas—and other equally undesirable occupants. Not a pleasant place to sojourn in until— How long can a man live without eating, Judge? You know, of course, that the Indians selected an elevated and isolated site, such as this, because of its strategical advantages? This makes an ideal fort. Nobody can get into it except by negotiating the slope we came up last night. And a rifle in the hands of a man with a yearning to use it would make *that* approach pretty unsafe, wouldn't it?"

"My God!" moaned the Judge; "you talk like a man bereft of his senses!"

"Or like a man who is determined not to be robbed of his rights," added Trevison. "Well, come along. We won't dwell on such things if they depress you."

He took the Judge's arm and escorted him. They circled the broad stone ledge. It ran in wide, irregular sweeps in the general outline of a huge circle, surrounded by the dust-covered slopes melting into the plains, so vast that the eye ached in an effort to comprehend them. Miles away they could see smoke befouling the blue of the sky. The Judge knew the smoke came from Manti, and he wondered if Corrigan were wondering over his disappearance. He mentioned that to Trevison, and the latter grinned faintly at him.

"I forgot to mention that to you. It was all arranged last night. Clay Levins went to Dry Bottom on a night train. He took with him a letter, which he was to mail at Dry Bottom, explaining your absence to Corrigan. Needless to say, your signature was forged. But I did so good a job that Corrigan will not suspect. Corrigan will get the letter by tonight. It says that you are going to take a long rest."

The Judge gasped and looked quickly at Trevison. The young man's face was wreathed in a significant grin.

"In the first analysis, this looks like a rather strange proceeding," said Trevison. "But if you get deeper into it you see its logic. You know where the original record is. I want it. I mean to have it. One life—a dozen lives—won't stop me. Oh, well, we won't talk about it if you're going to shudder that way."

He led the Judge up a flimsy, rotted ladder to a flat roof, forcing him to look into a chamber where vermin fled at their appearance. Then through numerous passages, low, narrow, reeking with a musty odor that nauseated the Judge; on narrow ledges where they had to hug the walls to keep from falling, and then into an open court with a stone floor, stained dark, in the center a huge oblong block of stone, surmounting a pyramid, appalling in its somber suggestiveness.

"The sacrificial altar," said Trevison, grimly. "These stains here, are—"

He stopped, for the Judge had turned his back.

Trevison led him away. He had to help him down the ladder each time they descended, and when they

reached the chamber from which they had started the Judge was white and shaking.

Trevison pushed him inside and silently took a position at the door. The Judge sank to the floor of the chamber, groaning.

The hours dragged slowly. Trevison changed his position twice. Once he went away, but returned in a few minutes with a canteen, from which he drank, deeply. The Judge had been without food or water since the night before, and thirst tortured him. The gurgle of the water as it came out of the canteen, maddened him.

"I'd like a drink, Trevison."

"Of course. Any man would."

"May I have one?"

"The minute you tell me where that record is."

The Judge subsided. A moment later Trevison's voice floated into the chamber, cold and resonant:

"I don't think you're in this thing for money, Judge. Corrigan has some sort of a hold on you. What is it?"

The Judge did not answer.

The sun climbed to the zenith. It grew intensely hot in the chamber. Twice during the afternoon the Judge asked for water, and each time he received the answer he had received before. He did not ask for food, for he felt it would not be given him. At sundown his captor entered the chamber and gave him a meager draught from the canteen. Then he withdrew and stood on the ledge in front of the door, looking out into the darkening plains, and watching him, a conviction of the futility of resisting him seized the Judge. He stood

framed in the opening of the chamber, the lines of his bold, strong face prominent in the dusk, the rifle held loosely in the crook of his left arm, the right hand caressing the stock, his shoulders squared, his big, lithe, muscular figure suggesting magnificent physical strength, as the light in his eyes, the set of his head and the firm lines of his mouth, brought a conviction of rare courage and determination. The sight of him thrilled the Judge; he made a picture that sent the Judge's thoughts skittering back to things primitive and heroic. In an earlier day the Judge had dreamed of being like him, and the knowledge that he had fallen far short of realizing his ideal made him shiver with self-aversion. He stifled a moan—or tried to and did not succeed, for it reached Trevison's ears and he turned quickly.

"Did you call, Judge?"

"Yes, yes!" whispered the Judge, hoarsely. "I want—to tell you everything! I have longed to tell you all along!"

An hour later they were sitting on the edge of the ledge, their feet dangling, the abyss below them, the desert stars twinkling coldly above them; around them the indescribable solitude of a desert night filled with mystery, its vague, haunting, whispering voice burdened with its age-old secrets. Trevison had an arm around the Judge's shoulder. Their voices mingled—the Judge's low, quavering; Trevison's full, deep, sympathetic.

After a while a rider appeared out of the starlit haze of the plains below them. The Judge started. Trevison laughed.

"It's Clay Levins, Judge. I've been watching him for half an hour. He'll stay here with you while I go after the record. Under the bottom drawer, eh?"

Levins hallooed to them. Trevison answered, and he and the Judge walked forward to meet Levins at the crest of the slope.

"Slicker'n a whistle!" declared Levins, answering the question Trevison put to him. "I mailed the damn letter an' come back on the train that brought it to him!" He grinned feliney at the Judge. "I reckon you're a heap dry an' hungry by this time?"

"The Judge has feasted," said Trevison. "I'm going after the record. You're to stay here with the Judge until I return. Then the three of us will ride to Las Vegas, where we will take a train to Santa Fe, to turn the record over to the Circuit Court."

"Sounds good!" gloated Levins. "But it's too long around. I'm for somethin' more direct. Why not take the Judge with you to Manti, get the record, takin' a bunch of your boys with you—an' salivate that damned Corrigan an' his deputies!"

Trevison laughed softly. "I don't want any violence if I can avoid it. My land won't run away while we're in Santa Fe. And the Judge doesn't want to meet Corrigan just now. I don't know that I blame him."

"Where's the record?"

Trevison told him, and Levins grumbled. "Corrigan'll have his deputies guardin' the courthouse, most likely. If you run ag'in 'em, they'll bore you, sure as hell!"

"I'll take care of myself—I promise you that!"

he laughed, and the Judge shuddered at the sound. He vanished into the darkness of the ledge, returning presently with Nigger, led him down the slope, called a low "So-long" to the two watchers on the ledge, and rode away into the haze of the plains.

Trevison rode fast, filled with a grim elation. He pitied the Judge. An error—a momentary weakening of moral courage—had plunged the jurist into the clutches of Corrigan; he could hardly be held responsible for what had transpired—he was a puppet in the hands of an unscrupulous schemer, with a threat of exposure hanging over him. No wonder he feared Corrigan! Trevison's thoughts grew bitter as they dwelt upon the big man; the old longing to come into violent physical contact with the other seized him, raged within him, brought a harsh laugh to his lips as he rode. But a greater passion than he felt for the Judge or Corrigan tugged at him as he urged the big black over the plains toward the twinkling lights of Manti—a fierce exultation which centered around Rosalind Benham. She had duped him, betrayed him to his enemy, had played with him—but she had lost!

Yet the thought of his coming victory over her was poignantly unsatisfying. He tried to picture her—did picture her—receiving the news of Corrigan's defeat, and somehow it left him with a feeling of regret. The vengeful delight that he should have felt was absent—he felt sorry for her. He charged himself with being a fool for yielding to so strange a sentiment, but it lingered persistently. It fed his rage against Corrigan, however, doubled it, for upon him lay the blame.

It was late when he reached the outskirts of Manti. He halted Nigger in the shadow of a shed a hundred yards or so down the track from the courthouse, dismounted and made his way cautiously down the railroad tracks. He was beyond the radius of the lights from various windows that he passed, but he moved stealthily, not knowing whether Corrigan had stationed guards about the courthouse, as Levins had warned. An instant after reaching a point opposite the courthouse he congratulated himself on his discretion, for he caught a glimmer of light at the edge of a window shade in the courthouse, saw several indistinct figures congregated at the side door, outside. He slipped behind a tool shed at the side of the track, and crouching there, watched and listened. A mumbling of voices reached him, but he could distinguish no word. But it was evident that the men outside were awaiting the reappearance of one of their number who had gone into the building.

Trevison watched, impatiently. Then presently the side door opened, letting out a flood of light, which bathed the figures of the waiting men. Trevison scowled, for he recognized them as Corrigan's deputies. But he was not surprised, for he had half expected them to be hanging around the building. Two figures stepped down from the door as he watched, and he knew them for Corrigan and Gieger. Corrigan's voice reached him.

"The lock on this door is broken. I had to kick it in this morning. One of you stay inside, here. The rest of you scatter and keep your eyes peeled. There's

trickery afoot. Judge Lindman didn't go to Dry Bottom—the agent says he's sure of that because he saw every man that's got aboard a train here within the last twenty-four hours—and Judge Lindman wasn't among them! Levins was, though; he left on the one-thirty this morning and got back on the six-o'clock, tonight." He vanished into the darkness beyond the door, but called back: "I'll be within call. Don't be afraid to shoot if you see anything suspicious!"

Trevison saw a man enter the building, and the light was blotted out by the closing of the door. When his eyes were again accustomed to the darkness he observed that the men were standing close together—they seemed to be holding a conference. Then the group split up, three going toward the front of the building; two remaining near the side door, and two others walking around to the rear.

For an instant Trevison regretted that he had not taken Levins' advice about forming a posse of his own men to take the courthouse by storm, and he debated the thought of postponing action. But there was no telling what might happen during an interval of delay. In his rage over the discovery of the trick that had been played on him Corrigan might tear the interior of the building to pieces. He would be sure to if he suspected the presence of the original record. Trevison did not go for the help that would have been very welcome. Instead, he spent some time twirling the cylinder of his pistol.

He grew tired of crouching after a time and lay flat on his stomach in the shadow of the tool shed,

watching the men as they tramped back and forth around the building. He knew that sooner or later there would be a minute or two of relaxation, and of this he had determined to take advantage. But it was not until sound in the town had perceptibly decreased in volume that there was any sign of the men relaxing their vigil. And then he noted them congregating at the front of the building.

"Hell," he heard one of them say; "what's the use of hittin' that trail *all* night! Bill's inside, an' we can see the door from here. I'm due for a smoke an' a palaver!" Matches flared up; the sounds of their voices reached Trevison.

Trevison disappointedly relaxed. Then, filled with a sudden decision, he slipped around the back of the tool shed and stole toward the rear of the courthouse. It projected beyond the rear of the bank building, adjoining it, forming an L, into the shadow of which Trevison slipped. He stood there for an instant, breathing rapidly, undecided. The darkness in the shadow was intense, and he was forced to feel his way along the wall for fear of stumbling. He was leaning heavily on his hands, trusting to them rather than to his footing, when the wall seemed to give way under them and he fell forward, striking on his hands and knees. Fortunately, he had made no sound in falling, and he remained in the kneeling position until he got an idea of what had happened. He had fallen across the threshold of a doorway. The door had been unfastened and the pressure of his hands had forced it inward. It was the rear door of the bank building. He looked

inward, wondering at Braman's carelessness—and stared fixedly straight into a beam of light that shone through a wedge-shaped crevice between two boards in the partition that separated the buildings.

He got up silently, stepped stealthily into the room, closing the door behind him. He tried to fasten it and discovered that the lock was broken. For some time he stood, wondering, and then, giving it up, he made his way cautiously around the room, searching for Braman's cot. He found that, too, empty, and he decided that some one had broken into the building during Braman's absence. Moving away from the cot, he stumbled against something soft and yielding, and his pistol flashed into his hand in sinister preparation, for he knew from the feel of the soft object that it was a body, and he suspected that it was Braman, stalking him. He thought that until he remembered the broken lock on the door, and then the significance of it burst upon him. Whoever had broken the lock had fixed Braman. He knelt swiftly and ran his hands over the prone form, drawing back at last with the low ejaculation: "He's a goner!" He had no time or inclination to speculate over the manner of Braman's death, and made catlike progress toward the crevice in the partition. Reaching it, he dropped on his hands and knees and peered through. A wooden box on the other side of the partition intervened, but above it he could see the form of the deputy. The man was stretched out in a chair, sideways to the crevice in the wall, sleeping. A grin of huge satisfaction spread over Trevison's face.

His movements were very deliberate and cautious. But in a quarter of an hour he had pulled the board out until an opening was made in the partition, and then propping the board back with a chair he reached through and slowly shoved the box on the other side back far enough to admit his body. Crawling through, he rose on the other side, crossed the floor carefully, kneeled at the drawer where Judge Lindman had concealed the record, pulled it out and stuck it in the waistband of his trousers, in front, his eyes glittering with exultation. Then he began to back toward the opening in the partition. At the instant he was preparing to stoop to crawl back into the bank building, the deputy in the chair yawned, stretched and opened his eyes, staring stupidly at him. There was no mistaking the dancing glitter in Trevison's eyes, no possible misinterpretation of his tense, throaty whisper: "One chirp and you're a dead one!" And the deputy stiffened in the chair, dumb with astonishment and terror.

The deputy had not seen the opening in the partition, for it was partly hidden from his view by the box which Trevison had encountered in entering, and before the man had an opportunity to look toward the place, Trevison commanded him again, in a sharp, cold whisper:

"Get up and turn your back to me—quick! Any noise and I'll plug you! Move!"

The deputy obeyed. Then he received an order to walk to the door without looking back. He reached the door—halted.

"Now open it and get out!"

The man did as bidden; diving headlong out into the darkness, swinging the door shut behind him. His yell to his companions mingled with the roar of Trevison's pistol as he shattered the kerosene lamp. The bullet hit the neck of the glass bowl, a trifle below the burner, the latter describing a parabola in the air and falling into the ruin of the bowl. The chimney crashed, the flame from the wick touched the oil and flared up brilliantly.

Trevison was half way through the wall by the time the oil ignited, and he grinned coldly at the sight. Haste was important now. He slipped through the opening, pulled the chair from between the board and wall, letting the board snap back, and placing the chair against it. He felt certain that the deputies would think that in some manner he had run their barricade and entered the building through the door.

He heard voices outside, a fusillade of shots, the tinkle of breaking glass; against the pine boards at his side came the wicked thud of bullets, the splintering of wood as they tore through the partition and embedded themselves in the outside wall. He ducked low and ran to the rear door, swinging it open. Braman's body bothered him; he could not leave it there, knowing the building would soon be in flames. He dragged the body outside, to a point several feet distant from the building, dropping it at last and standing erect for the first time to fill his lungs and look about him. Looking back as he ran down the tracks toward the shed where he had left Nigger, he saw shadowy forms of men running around the courthouse, which was now dully

illuminated, the light from within dancing fitfully through the window shades. Flaming streaks rent the night from various points—thinking him still in the building the deputies were shooting through the windows. Manti, rudely awakened, was pouring its population through its doors in streams. Shouts, hoarse, inquisitive, drifted to Trevison's ears. Lights blazed up, flickering from windows like giant fireflies. Doors slammed, dogs were barking, men were running. Trevison laughed vibrantly as he ran. But his lips closed tightly when he saw two or three shadowy figures darting toward him, coming from various directions—one from across the street; another coming straight down the railroad track, still another advancing from his right. He bowed his head and essayed to pass the first figure. It reached out a hand and grasped his shoulder, arresting his flight.

“What's up?”

“Let go, you damned fool!”

The man still clung to him. Trevison wrenched himself free and struck, viciously. The man dropped with a startled cry. Another figure was upon Trevison. He wanted no more trouble at that minute.

“Hell to pay!” he panted as the second man loomed close to him in the darkness; “Trevison's in the courthouse!”

He heard the other gasp; saw him lunge forward. He struck again, bitterly, and the man went to his knees. He was up again instantly, as Trevison fled into the darkness, crying resonantly:

“This way, boys—here he is!”

"Corrigan!" breathed Trevison. He ducked as a flame-spurt split the night; reaching a corner of the shed where he had left his horse as a succession of reports rattled behind him. Corrigan was firing at him. He dared not use his own pistol, lest its flash reveal his whereabouts, and he knew he would have no chance against the odds that were against him. Nor was he intent on murder. He flung himself into the saddle, and for the first time since he had come into Trevison's possession Nigger knew the bite of spurs earnestly applied. He snorted, leaped, and plunged forward, the clatter of his hoofs bringing lancelike streaks of fire out of the surrounding blackness. Behind him Trevison heard Corrigan raging impotently, profanely. There came another scattering volley. Trevison reeled, caught himself, and then hung hard to the saddle-horn, as Nigger fled into the night, running as a coyote runs from the daylight.

CHAPTER XXIV

ANOTHER WOMAN LIES

SHORTLY before midnight Aunt Agatha Benham laid her book down, took off her glasses, wiped her eyes and yawned. She sat for a time stretched out in her chair, her hands folded in her lap, meditatively looking at the flicker of the kerosene lamp, thinking of the conveniences she had given up in order to chaperon a wilful girl who did not appreciate her services. It was the selfishness of youth, she decided—nothing less. But still Rosalind might understand what a sacrifice her aunt was making for her. Thrilling with self-pity, she got up, blew out the light and ascended the stairs to her room. She plumped herself in a chair at one of the front windows before beginning to undress, that she might again feel the delicious thrill, for that was the only consolation she got from a contemplation of her sacrifice. Rosalind never offered her a word of gratitude!

The thrill she anticipated was not the one she experienced—it was a thrill of apprehension that seized her—for a glowing midnight sky met her gaze as she stared in the direction of Manti, vast, extensive. In its center, directly over the town, was a fierce white glare with off-shoots of licking, leaping tongues of flame that reached skyward hungrily.

Agatha watched for one startled instant, and then she was in Rosalind's room, leaning over the bed, shaking her. The girl got up, dressed in her night clothes, and together they stood at one of the windows in the girl's room, watching.

The fierce white center of the fire seemed to expand.

"It's a fire—in Manti!" said the girl. "See! Another building has caught! Oh, I *do* hope they can put it out!"

They stood long at the window. Once, when the glow grew more brilliant, the girl exclaimed sharply, but after a time the light began to fade, and she drew a breath of relief.

"They have it under control," she said.

"Well, come to bed," advised Agatha.

"Wait!" said the girl. She pressed her face against the window and peered intently into the darkness. Then she threw up the sash, stuck her head out and listened. She drew back, her face slowly whitening.

"Some one is coming, Aunty — and riding very fast!"

A premonition of tragedy, associated with the fire, had seized the girl at her first glimpse of the light, though she had said nothing. The appearance of a rider, approaching the house at breakneck speed had added strength to her fears, and now, driven by the urge of apprehension that had seized her she flitted out of the room before Agatha could restrain her, and was down in the sitting-room in an instant, applying a match to the lamp. As the light flared up she heard the thunder of hoofs just outside the door, and she ran to it,

throwing it open. She shrank back, drawing her breath gaspingly, for the rider had dismounted and stepped toward her, into the dim light of the open doorway.

"You!" she said.

A low laugh was her answer, and Trevison stepped over the threshold and closed the door behind him. From the foot of the stairs Agatha saw him, and she stood, nerveless and shaking with dread over the picture he made.

He had been more than forty-eight hours without sleep, the storm-center of action had left its impression on him, and his face was gaunt and haggard, with great, dark hollows under his eyes. The three or four days' growth of beard accentuated the bold lines of his chin and jaw; his eyes were dancing with the fires of passion; he held a Winchester rifle under his right arm, the left, hanging limply at his side, was stained darkly. He swayed as he stood looking at the girl, and smiled with faint derision at the naked fear and wonder that had leaped into her eyes. But the derision was tinged with bitterness, for this girl with both hands pressed over her breast, heaving with the mingled emotions of modesty and dismay, was one of the chief factors in the scheme to rob him. The knowledge hurt him worse than the bullet which had passed through his arm. She had been uppermost in his thoughts during his reckless ride from Manti, and he would have cheerfully given his land, his ten years of labor, for the assurance that she was innocent. But he knew guilt when he saw it, and proof of it had been in her avoidance of him, in her ride to save Corrigan's mining

machinery, in her subsequent telling of his presence at the butte on the night of the dynamiting, in her bitter declaration that he ought to be punished for it. The case against her was strong. And yet on his ride from Manti he had been irresistibly drawn toward the Bar B ranchhouse. He had told himself as he rode that the impulse to visit her this night was strong within him because on his way to the pueblo he was forced to pass the house, but he knew better—he had lied to himself. He wanted to talk with her again; he wanted to show her the land record, which proved her fiance's guilt; he wanted to watch her as she looked at the record, to learn from her face—what he might find there.

He stood the rifle against the wall near the door, while the girl and her aunt watched him, breathlessly. His voice was vibrant and hoarse, but well under control, and he smiled with straight lips as he set the rifle down and drew the record from his waistband.

"I've something to show you, Miss Benham. I couldn't pass the house without letting you know what has happened." He opened the book and stepped to her side, swinging his left hand up, the index finger indicating a page on which his name appeared.

"Look!" he said, sharply, and watched her face closely. He saw her cheeks blanch, and set his lips grimly.

"Why," she said, after she had hurriedly scanned the page; "it seems to prove your title! But this is a court record, isn't it?" She examined the gilt lettering on the back of the volume, and looked up at him

with wide, luminous eyes. "Where did you get that book?"

"From the courthouse."

"Why, I thought people weren't permitted to take court records —"

"I've taken this one," he laughed.

She looked at the blood on his hand, shudderingly. "Why," she said; "there's been violence! The fire, the blood on your hand, the record, your ride here — What does it mean?"

"It means that I've been denied my rights, and I've taken them. Is there any crime in that? Look here!" He took another step and stood looking down at her. "I'm not saying anything about Corrigan. You know what we think of each other, and we'll fight it out, man to man. But the fact that a woman is engaged to one man doesn't bar another man from the game. And I'm in this game to the finish. And even if I don't get you I don't want you to be mixed up in these schemes and plots — you're too good a girl for that!"

"What do you mean?" She stiffened, looking scornfully at him, her chin held high, outraged innocence in her manner. His cold grin of frank disbelief roused her to furious indignation. What right had he to question her integrity to make such speeches to her after his disgraceful affair with Hester Harvey?

"I do not care to discuss the matter with you!" she said, her lips stiff.

"Ha, ha!" The bitter derision in his laugh made her blood riot with hatred. He walked toward the door and took up the rifle, dimly remembering that

she had used the same words to him once before, when he had met her as she had been riding toward Manti. Of course she wouldn't discuss such a thing—he had been a blind fool to think she would. But it proved her guilt. Swinging the rifle under his arm, he opened the door, turned when on the threshold and bowed to her.

"I'm sorry I troubled you, Miss Benham," he said. He essayed to turn, staggered, looked vacantly around the room, his lips in a queerly cold half-smile, and then without uttering a sound pitched forward, one shoulder against the door jamb, and slid slowly to his knees, where he rested, his head sinking limply to his chest. He heard the girl cry out sharply and he raised his head with an effort and smiled reassuringly at her, and when he felt her hands on his arm, trying to lift him, he laughed aloud in self-derision and got to his feet, hanging to the door jamb.

"I'm sorry, Miss Benham," he mumbled. "I lost some blood, I suppose. Rotten luck, isn't it. I shouldn't have stopped." He turned to go, lurched forward and would have fallen out of the door had not the girl seized and steadied him.

He did not resist when she dragged him into the room and closed the door, but he waved her away when she tried to take his arm and lead him toward the kitchen where, she insisted, she would prepare a stimulant and food for him. He tottered after her, tall and gaunt, his big, lithe figure strangely slack, his head rocking, the room whirling around him. He had held to the record and the rifle; the latter by the muzzle, dragging it after him, the record under his arm.

But his marvelous constitution, a result of his clean living and outdoor life, responded quickly to the stimulation of food and hot drinks, and in half an hour he got up, still a little weak, but with some color in his cheeks, and shame-facedly thanked the girl. He realized now, that he should not have come here; the past few hours loomed in his thoughts like a wild nightmare in which he had lost his sense of proportion, yielding to the elemental passions that had been aroused in his long, sleepless struggle, making him act upon impulses that he would have frowned contemptuously away in a normal frame of mind.

"I've been nearly crazy, I think," he said to the girl with a wan smile of self-accusation, "I want you to forget what I said."

"What happened at Manti?" she demanded, ignoring his words.

He laughed at the recollection, tucking his rifle under his arm, preparatory to leaving. "I went after the record. I got it. There was a fight. But I got away."

"But the fire!"

"I was forced to smash a lamp in the courthouse. The wick fell into the oil, and I couldn't delay to —"

"Was anybody hurt — besides you?"

"Braman's dead." The girl gasped and shrank from him, and he saw that she believed he had killed the banker, and he was about to deny the crime when Agatha's voice shrilled through the doorway:

"There are some men coming, Rosalind!" And then, vindictively: "I presume they are desperadoes — too!"

"Deputies!" said Trevison. The girl clasped her hands over her breast in dismay, which changed to terror when she saw Trevison stiffen and leap toward the door. She was afraid for him, horrified over this second lawless deed, dumb with doubt and indecision — and she didn't want them to catch him!

He opened the door, paused on the threshold and smiled at her with straight, hard lips.

"Braman was —"

"Go!" she cried in a frenzy of anxiety; "go!"

He laughed mockingly, and looked at her intently. "I suppose I will never understand women. You are my enemy, and yet you give me food and drink and are eager to have me escape your accomplice. Don't you know that this record will ruin him?"

"Go, go!" she panted.

"Well, you're a puzzle!" he said. She saw him leap into the saddle, and she ran to the lamp, blew out the flame, and returned to the open door, in which she stood for a long time, listening to rapid hoof beats that gradually receded. Before they died out entirely there came the sound of many others, growing in volume and drawing nearer, and she beat her hands together, murmuring:

"Run, Nigger — run, run, run!"

She closed the door as the hoof beats sounded in the yard, locking it and retreating to the foot of the stairs, where Agatha stood.

"What does it all mean?" asked the elder woman. She was trembling.

"Oh, I don't know," whispered the girl, gulping hard to keep her voice from breaking. "It's something about Trevison's land. And I'm afraid, Aunt, that there is something terribly wrong. Mr. Corrigan says it belongs to him, and the court in Manti has decided in his favor. But according to the record in Trevison's possession, *he* has a clear title to it."

"There, there," consoled Agatha; "your father wouldn't permit —"

"No, no!" said the girl, vehemently; "he wouldn't. But I can't understand why Trevison fights so hard if — if he is in the wrong!"

"He is a desperado, my dear; a wild, reckless spirit who has no regard for law and order. Of course, if these men are after him, you will tell them he was here!"

"No!" said the girl, sharply; "I shan't!"

"Perhaps you shouldn't," acquiesced Agatha. She patted the girl's shoulder. "Maybe it would be for the best, dear—he may be in the right. And I think I understand why you went riding with him so much, dear. He may be wild and reckless, but he's a man — every inch of him!"

The girl squeezed her relative's hand and went to open the door, upon which had come a loud knock. Corrigan stood framed in the opening. She could see his face only dimly.

"There's no occasion for alarm, Miss Benham," he said, and she felt that he could see her better than she could see him, and thus must have discerned something of her emotion. "I must apologize for this

noisy demonstration. I believe I'm a little excited, though. Has Trevison passed here within the last hour or so?"

"No," she said, firmly.

He laughed shortly. "Well, we'll get him. I've split my men up—some have gone to his ranch, the others have headed for Levins' place."

"What has happened?"

"Enough. Judge Lindman disappeared—the supposition is that he was abducted. I placed some men around the courthouse, to safeguard the records, and Trevison broke in and set fire to the place. He also robbed the safe in the bank, and killed Braman—choked him to death. A most revolting murder. I'm sorry I disturbed you—good night."

The girl closed the door as he left it, and leaned against it, weak and shaking. Corrigan's voice had a curious note in it. He had told her he was sorry to have disturbed her, but the words had not rung true—there had been too much satisfaction in them. What was she to believe from this night's events? One thought leaped vividly above the others that rioted in her mind: Trevison had again sinned against the law, and this time his crime was murder! She shrank away from the door and joined Agatha at the foot of the stairs.

"Aunty," she sobbed; "I want to go away. I want to go back East, away from this lawlessness and confusion!"

"There, there, dear," soothed Agatha. "I am sure everything will come out all right. But Trevison *does*

look to be the sort of a man who would abduct a judge, doesn't he? If I were a girl, and felt that he were in love with me, I'd be mighty careful—"

"That he wouldn't abduct you?" laughed the girl, tremulously, cheered by the change in her relative's manner.

"No," said Agatha, slyly. "I'd be mighty careful that he *got* me!"

"Oh!" said the girl, and buried her face in her aunt's shoulder.

CHAPTER XXV

IN THE DARK

TREVISION faced the darkness between him and the pueblo with a wild hope pulsing through his veins. Rosalind Benham had had an opportunity to deliver him into the hands of his enemy and she had not taken advantage of it. There was but one interpretation that he might place upon her failure to aid her accomplice. She declined to take an active part in the scheme. She had been passive, content to watch while Corrigan did the real work. Possibly she had no conception of the enormity of the crime. She had been eager to have Corrigan win, and influenced by her affection and his arguments she had done what she could without actually committing herself to the robbery. It was a charitable explanation, and had many flaws, but he clung to it persistently, nurturing it with his hopes and his hunger for her, building it up until it became a structure of logic firmly fixed and impregnable. Women were easily influenced—that had been his experience with them—he was forced to accept it as a trait of the sex. So he absolved her, his hunger for her in no way sated at the end.

His thoughts ran to Corrigan in a riot of rage that pained him like a knife thrust; his lust for vengeance

was a savage, bitter-visaged demon that held him in its clutch and made his temples pound with a yearning to slay. And that, of course, would have to be the end. For the enmity that lay between them was not a thing to be settled by the law—it was a man to man struggle that could be settled in only one way—by the passions, naked, elemental, eternal. He saw it coming; he leaped to meet it, eagerly.

Every stride the black horse made shortened by that much the journey he had resolved upon, and Nigger never ran as he was running now. The black seemed to feel that he was on the last lap of a race that had lasted for more than forty-eight hours, with short intervals of rest between, and he did his best without faltering.

Order had come out of the chaos of plot and counter-plot; Trevison's course was to be as direct as his hatred. He would go to the pueblo, take Judge Lindman and the record to Santa Fe, and then return to Manti for a last meeting with Corrigan.

A late moon, rising from a cleft in some distant mountains, bathed the plains with a silvery flood when horse and rider reached a point within a mile of the pueblo, and Nigger covered the remainder of the distance at a pace that made the night air drum in Trevison's ears. The big black slowed as he came to a section of broken country surrounding the ancient city, but he got through it quickly and skirted the sand slopes, taking the steep acclivity leading to the ledge of the pueblo in a dozen catlike leaps and coming to a halt in the shadow of an adobe house, heaving deeply,

his rider flung himself out of the saddle and ran along the ledge to the door of the chamber where he had imprisoned Judge Lindman.

Trevison could see no sign of the Judge or Levins. The ledge was bare, aglow, the openings of the communal houses facing it loomed dark, like the doors of tombs. A ghastly, unearthly silence greeted Trevison's call after the echoes died away; the upper tier of adobe boxes seemed to nod in ghostly derision as his gaze swept them. There was no sound, no movement, except the regular cough of his own laboring lungs, and the rustle of his clothing as his chest swelled and deflated with the effort. He exclaimed impatiently and retraced his steps, peering into recesses between the communal houses, certain that the Judge and Levins had fallen asleep in his absence. He turned at a corner and in a dark angle almost stumbled over Levins. He was lying on his stomach, his right arm under his head, his face turned sideways. Trevison thought at first that he was asleep and prodded him gently with the toe of his boot. A groan smote his ears and he kneeled quickly, turning Levins over. Something damp and warm met his fingers as he seized the man by the shoulder, and he drew the hand away quickly, exclaiming sharply as he noted the stain on it.

His exclamation brought Levins' eyes open, and he stared upward, stupidly at first, then with a bright gaze of comprehension. He struggled and sat up, swaying from side to side.

"They got the Judge, 'Brand'—they run him off, with my cayuse!"

"Who got him?"

"I ain't reckonin' to know. Some of Corrigan's scum, most likely—I didn't see 'em close."

"How long ago?"

"Not a hell of a while. Mebbe fifteen or twenty minutes. I been missin' a lot of time, I reckon. Can't have been long, though."

"Which way did they go?"

"Off towards Manti. Two of 'em took him. The rest is layin' low somewhere, most likely. Watch out they don't get *you*! I ain't seen 'em run off, yet!"

"How did it happen?"

"I aint got it clear in my head, yet. Just happened I reckon. The Judge was settin on the ledge just in front of the dobie house you had him in. I was moseyin' along the edge, tryin' to figger out what a light in the sky off towards Manti meant. I couldn't figger it out—what in hell was it, anyway?"

"The courthouse burned—maybe the bank."

Levins chuckled. "You got the record, then."

"Yes."

"An' I've lost the Judge! Ain't I a box-head, though!"

"That's all right. Go ahead. What happened?"

"I was moseyin along the ledge. Just when I got to the slope where we come up—passin' it—I seen a bunch of guys, on horses, coming out of the shadow of an angle, down there. I hadn't seen 'em before. I knowed somethin' was up an' I turned, to light out for shelter. An' just then one of 'em burns me in the back—with a rifle bullet. It couldn't have been no six,

from that distance. It took the starch out of me, an' I caved, I reckon, for a little while. When I woke up the Judge was gone. The moon had just come up an' I seen him ridin' away on my cayuse, between two other guys. I reckon I must have gone off again, when you shook me." He laughed, weakly. "What gets *me*, is where them other guys went, after the two sloped with the Judge. If they'd have been hangin' around they'd sure have got *you*, comin' up here, wouldn't they?"

Trevison's answer was a hoarse exclamation. He swung Levins up and bore him into one of the communal houses, whose opening faced away from the plains and the activity. Then he ran to where he had left Nigger, leading the animal back into the zig-zag passages, pulling his rifle out of the saddle holster and stationing himself in the shadow of the house in which he had taken Levins.

"They've come back, eh?" the wounded man's voice floated out to him.

"Yes—five or six of them. No—eight! They've got sharp eyes, too!" he added stepping back as a rifle bullet droned over his head, chipping a chunk of adobe from the roof of the box in whose shelter he stood.

Sullenly, Corrigan had returned to Manti with the deputies that had accompanied him to the Bar B. He had half expected to find Trevison at the ranchhouse, for he had watched him when he had ridden away and ne seemed to have been headed in that direction. Jealousy dwelt darkly in the big man's heart, and he had

found his reason for the suspicion there. He thought he knew truth when he saw it, and he would have sworn that truth shone from Rosalind Benham's eyes when she had told him that she had not seen Trevison pass that way. He had not known that what he took for the truth was the cleverest bit of acting the girl had ever been called upon to do. He had decided that Trevison had swung off the Bar B trail somewhere between Manti and the ranchhouse, and he led his deputies back to town, content to permit his men to continue the search for Trevison, for he was convinced that the latter's visit to the courthouse had resulted in disappointment, for he had faith in Judge Lindman's declaration that he had destroyed the record. He had accused himself many times for his lack of caution in not being present when the record had been destroyed, but regrets had become impotent and futile.

Reaching Manti, he dispersed his deputies and sought his bed in the *Castle*. He had not been in bed more than an hour when an attendant of the hotel called to him through the door that a man named Gieger wanted to talk with him, below. He dressed and went down to the street, to find Gieger and another deputy sitting on their horses in front of the hotel with Judge Lindman, drooping from his long vigil, between them.

Corrigan grinned scornfully at the Judge.

"Clever, eh?" he sneered. He spoke softly, for the dawn was not far away, and he knew that a voice carries resonantly at that hour.

"I don't understand you!" Judicial dignity sat

sadly on the Judge; he was tired and haggard, and his voice was a weak treble. "If you mean—"

"I'll show you what I mean." Corrigan motioned to the deputies. "Bring him along!" Leading the way he took them through Manti's back door across a railroad spur to a shanty beside the track which the engineer in charge of the dam occasionally occupied when his duty compelled him to check up arriving material and supplies. Because plans and other valuable papers were sometimes left in the shed it was stoutly built, covered with corrugated iron, and the windows barred with iron, prison-like. Reaching the shed, Corrigan unlocked the door, shoved the Judge inside, closed the door on the Judge's indignant protests, questioned the deputies briefly, gave them orders and then re-entered the shed, closing the door behind him.

He towered over the Judge, who had sunk weakly to a bench. It was pitch dark in the shed, but Corrigan had seen the Judge drop on the bench and knew exactly where he was.

"I want the whole story—without any reservations," said Corrigan, hoarsely; "and I want it quick—as fast as you can talk!"

The Judge got up, resenting the other's tone. He had also a half-formed resolution to assert his independence, for he had received certain assurances from Trevison with regard to his past which had impressed him—and still impressed him.

"I refuse to be questioned by you, sir—especially in this manner! I do not purpose to take further—"

The Judge felt Corrigan's fingers at his throat, and

gasped with horror, throwing up his hands to ward them off, failed, and heard Corrigan's laugh as the fingers gripped his throat and held.

When the Judge came to, it was with an excruciatingly painful struggle that left him shrinking and nerveless, lying in a corner, blinking at the light of a kerosene lamp. Corrigan sat on the edge of a flat-topped desk watching him with an ugly, appraising, speculative grin. It was as though the man were mentally gambling on his chances to recover from the throttling.

"Well," he said when the Judge at last struggled and sat up; "how do you like it? You'll get more if you don't talk fast and straight! Who wrote that letter, from Dry Bottom?"

Neither judicial dignity or resolutions of independence could resist the threatened danger of further violence that shone from Corrigan's eyes, and the Judge whispered gaspingly:

"Trevison."

"I thought so! Now, be careful how you answer this. What did Trevison want in the courthouse?"

"The original record of the land transfers."

"Did he get it?" Corrigan's voice was dangerously even, and the Judge squirmed and coughed before he spoke the hesitating word that was an admission of his deception:

"I told him—where—it was."

Paralyzed with fear, the Judge watched Corrigan slip off the desk and approach him. He got to his feet and raised his hands to shield his throat as the big man stopped in front of him.

"Don't, Corrigan—don't, for God's sake!"

"Bah!" said the big man. He struck, venomously. An instant later he put out the light and stepped down into the gray dawn, locking the door of the shanty behind him and not looking back.

CHAPTER XXVI

THE ASHES

ROSALIND BENHAM got up with the dawn and looked out of a window toward Manti. She had not slept. She stood at the window for some time and then returned to the bed and sat on its edge, staring thoughtfully downward. She could not get Trevison out of her mind. It seemed to her that a crisis had come and that it was imperative for her to reach a decision—to pronounce judgment. She was trying to do this calmly; she was trying to keep sentiment from prejudicing her. She found it difficult when considering Trevison, but when she arrayed Hester Harvey against her longing for the man she found that her scorn helped her to achieve a mental balance that permitted her to think of him almost dispassionately. She became a mere onlooker, with a calm, clear vision. In this rôle she weighed him. His deeds, his manner, his claims, she arrayed against Corrigan and his counter-claims and ambitions, and was surprised to discover that were she to be called upon to pass judgment on the basis of this surface evidence she would have decided in favor of Trevison. She had fought against that, for it was a tacit admission that her father was in some way connected with Corrigan's scheme, but she admitted

it finally, with a pulse of repugnance, and when she placed Levins' story on the mental balance, with the knowledge that she had seen the record which seemed to prove the contention of fraud in the land transaction, the evidence favored Trevison overwhelmingly.

She got up and began to dress, her lips set with determination. Corrigan had held her off once with plausible explanations, but she would not permit him to do so again. She intended to place the matter before her father. Justice must be done. Before she had half finished dressing she heard a rustle and turned to see Agatha standing in the doorway connecting their rooms.

"What is it, dear?"

"I can't stand the suspense any longer, Aunty. There is something very wrong about that land business. I am going to telegraph to father about it."

"I was going to ask you to do that, dear. It seems to me that that young Trevison is too much in earnest to be fighting for something that does not belong to him. If ever there was honesty in a man's face it was in his face last night. I don't believe for a minute that your father is concerned in Corrigan's schemes—if there are schemes. But it won't do any harm to learn what your father thinks about it. My dear—" she stepped to the girl and placed an arm around her waist "—last night as I watched Trevison, he reminded me of a—a very dear friend that I once knew. I saw the wreck of my own romance, my dear. He was just such a man as Trevison—reckless, impulsive, and impetuous—dare-devil who would not tolerate injustice or oppression. They wouldn't let me have him,

my dear, and I never would have another man. He went away, joined the army, and was killed at the battle of Kenesaw Mountain. I have kept his memory fresh in my heart, and last night when I looked at Trevison it seemed to me that he must be the reincarnation of the only man I ever loved. There must be something terribly wrong to make him act the way he does, my dear. And he loves you."

The girl bit her lips to repress the swelling emotions which clamored in wild response to this sympathetic understanding. She looked at Agatha, to see tears in her eyes, and she wheeled impulsively and threw her arms around the other's neck.

"Oh, I know exactly how you feel, Aunty. But —" she gulped "—he doesn't love me."

"I saw it in his eyes, my dear." Agatha's smile was tender and reminiscent. "Don't you worry. He will find a way to let you know — as he will find a way to beat Corrigan — if Corrigan is trying to defraud him! He's that kind, my dear!"

In spite of her aunt's assurances the girl's heart was heavy as she began her ride to Manti. Trevison might love her, — she had read that it was possible for a man to love two women — but she could never return his love, knowing of his affair with Hester. He should have justice, however, if they were trying to defraud him of his rights!

Long before she reached Manti she saw the train from Dry Bottom, due at Manti at six o'clock, gliding over the plains toward the town, and when she arrived at the station its passengers had been swallowed by

Manti's buildings and the station agent and an assistant were dragging and bumping trunks and boxes over the station platform.

The agent bowed deferentially to her and followed her into the telegraph room, clicking her message over the wires as soon as she had written it. When he had finished he wheeled his chair and grinned at her.

"See the courthouse and the bank?"

She had — all that was left of them — black, charred ruins with two iron safes, red from their baptism of fire, standing among them. Also two other buildings, one on each side of the two that had been destroyed, scorched and warped, but otherwise undamaged.

"Come pretty near burning the whole town. It took *some* work to confine *that* fire — coal oil. Trevison did a clean job. Robbed the safe in the bank. Killed Braman — guzzled him. An awful complete job, from Trevison's viewpoint. The town's riled, and I wouldn't give a plugged cent for Trevison's chances. He's sloped. Desperate character — I always thought he'd rip things loose — give him time. It was him blowed up Corrigan's mine. I ain't seen Corrigan since last night, but I heard him and twenty or thirty deputies are on Trevison's trail. I hope they get him." He squinted at her. "There's trouble brewing in this town, Miss Benham. I wouldn't advise you to stay here any longer than is *absolutely* necessary. There's two factions — looks like. It's about that land deal. Lefingwell and some more of them think they've been given a raw decision by the court and Corrigan. Excitement! Oh, Lord! This town is fierce. I ain't had any sleep

in— Your answer? I can't tell. Mebbe right away. Mebbe in an hour."

Rosalind went out upon the platform. The agent's words had revived a horror that she had almost forgotten—that she wanted to forget—the murder of Braman.

She walked to the edge of the station platform, tortured by thoughts in which she could find no excuse for Trevison. Murderer and robber! A fugitive from justice—the very justice he had been demanding! Her thoughts made her weak and sick, and she stepped down from the platform and walked up the track, halting beside a shed and leaning against it. Across the street from her was the *Castle* hotel. A man in boots, corduroy trousers, and a flannel shirt and dirty white apron, his sleeves rolled to the elbows, was washing the front windows and spitting streams of tobacco juice on the board walk. She shivered. A grocer next to the hotel was adjusting a swinging shelf affixed to the store-front, preparatory to piling his wares upon it; a lean-faced man standing in a doorway in the building adjoining the grocery was inspecting a six-shooter that he had removed from the holster at his side. Rosalind shivered again. Civilization and outlawry were strangely mingled here. She would not have been surprised to see the lean-faced man begin to shoot at the others. Filled with sudden trepidation she took a step away from the shed, intending to return to the station and wait for her answer.

As she moved she heard a low moan. She started, paling, and then stood stock still, trembling with dread,

but determined not to run. The sound came again, seeming to issue from the interior of the shed, and she retraced her step and leaned again against the wall of the building, listening.

There was no mistaking the sound—someone was in trouble. But she wanted to be certain before calling for help and she listened again to hear an unmistakable pounding on the wall near her, and a voice, calling frenziedly: "Help, help—for God's sake!"

Her fears fled and she sprang to the door, finding it locked. She rattled it, impotently, and then left it and ran across the street to where the window-washer stood. He wheeled and spat copiously, almost in her face, as she rapidly told him her news, and then deliberately dropped his brush and cloth into the dust and mud at his feet and jumped after her, across the street.

"Who's in here?" demanded the man, hammering on the door.

"It's I—Judge Lindman! Open the door! Hurry! I'm smothering—and hurt!"

In what transpired within the next few minutes—and indeed during the hours following—the girl felt like an outsider. No one paid any attention to her; she was shoved, jostled, buffeted, by the crowd that gathered, swarming from all directions. But she was intensely interested.

It seemed to her that every person in Manti gathered in front of the shed—that all had heard of the abduction of the Judge. Some one secured an iron bar and battered the lock off the door; a half-dozen men dragged the Judge out, and he stood in front of

the building, swaying in the hands of his supporters, his white hair disheveled, his lips blood-stained and smashed, where Corrigan had hit him. The frenzy of terror held him, and he looked wildly around at the tiers of faces confronting him, the cords of his neck standing out and writhing spasmodically. Twice he opened his lips to speak, but each time his words died in a dry gasp. At the third effort he shrieked:

"I—I want protection! Don't let him touch me again, men! He means to kill me! Don't let him touch me! I—I've been attacked—choked—knocked insensible! I appeal to you as American citizens for protection!"

It was fear, stark, naked, cringing, that the crowd saw. Faces blanched, bodies stiffened; a concerted breath, like a sigh, rose into the flat, desert air. Rosalind clenched her hands and stood rigid, thrilling with pity.

"Who done it?" A dozen voices asked the question.

"Corrigan!" The Judge screamed this, hysterically. "He is a thief and a scoundrel, men! He has plundered this county! He has prostituted your court. Your judge, too! I admit it. But I ask your mercy, men! I was forced into it! He threatened me! He falsified the land records! He wanted me to destroy the original record, but I didn't—I told Trevison where it was—I hid it! And because I wouldn't help Corrigan to rob you, he tried to kill me!"

A murmur, low, guttural, vindictive, rippled over the crowd, which had now swelled to such proportions

that the street could not hold it. It fringed the railroad track; men were packed against the buildings surrounding the shed; they shoved, jostled and squirmed in an effort to get closer to the Judge. The windows of the *Castle* hotel were filled with faces, among which Rosalind saw Hester Harvey's, ashen, her eyes aglow.

The Judge's words had stabbed Rosalind—each like a separate knife-thrust; they had plunged her into a mental vacuum in which her brain, atrophied, reeled, paralyzed. She staggered—a man caught her, muttered something about there being too much excitement for a lady, and gruffly ordered others to clear the way that he might lead her out of the jam. She resisted, for she was determined to stay to hear the Judge to the end, and the man grinned hugely at her; and to escape the glances that she could feel were directed at her she slipped through the crowd and sought the front of the shed, leaning against it, weakly.

A silence had followed the murmur that had run over the crowd. There was a breathless period, during which every man seemed to be waiting for his neighbor to take the initiative. They wanted a leader. And he appeared, presently—a big, broad-shouldered man forced his way through the crowd and halted in front of the Judge.

"I reckon we'll protect you, Judge. Just spit out what you got to say. We'll stand by you. Where's Trevison?"

"He came to the courthouse last night to get the record. I told him where it was. He forced me to go with him to an Indian pueblo, and he kept me there

yesterday. He left me there last night with Clay Levins, while he came here to get the record."

"Do you reckon he got it?"

"I don't know. But from the way Corrigan acted last night —"

"Yes, yes; he got it!"

The words shifted the crowd's gaze to Rosalind, swiftly. The girl had hardly realized that she had spoken. Her senses, paralyzed a minute before, had received the electric shock of sympathy from a continued study of the Judge's face. She saw remorse on it, regret, shame, and the birth of a resolution to make whatever reparation that was within his power, at whatever cost. It was a weak face, but it was not vicious, and while she had been standing there she had noted the lines of suffering. It was not until the girl felt the gaze of many curious eyes on her that she realized she had committed herself, and her cheeks flamed. She set herself to face the stares; she must go on now.

"It's Benham's girl!" she heard a man standing near her whisper hoarsely, and she faced them, her chin held high, a queer joy leaping in her heart. She knew at this minute that her sympathies had been with Trevison all along; that she had always suspected Corrigan, but had fought against the suspicion because of the thought that in some way her father might be dragged into the affair. It had been a cowardly attitude, and she was glad that she had shaken it off. As her brain, under the spur of the sudden excitement, resumed its function, her thoughts flitted to the agent's

babble during the time she had been sending the telegram to her father. She talked rapidly, her voice carrying far:

"Trevison got the record last night. He stopped at my ranch and showed it to me. I suppose he was going to the pueblo, expecting to meet Levins and Lindman there —"

"By God!" The big, broad-shouldered man standing at Judge Lindman's side interrupted her. He turned and faced the crowd. "We're damned fools, boys—lettin' this thing go on like we have! Corrigan's took his deputies out, trailin' Trevison, chargin' him with murderin' Braman, when his real purpose is to get his claws on that record! Trevison's been fightin' our fight for us, an' we've stood around like a lot of gillies, lettin' him do it! It's likely that a man who'd cook up a deal like the Judge, here, says Corrigan has, would cook up another, chargin' Trevison with guzzlin' the banker. I've knowed Trevison a long time, boys, an' I don't believe he'd guzzle anybody—he's too square a man for that!" He stood on his toes, raising his clenched hands, and bringing them down with a sweep of furious emphasis.

The crowd swayed restlessly. Rosalind saw it split apart, men fighting to open a pathway for a woman. There were shouts of: "Open up, there!" "Let the lady through!" "Gangway!" "She's got somethin' to say!" And the girl caught her breath sharply, for she recognized the woman as Hester Harvey.

It was some time before Hester reached the broad-shouldered man's side. There was a stain in each of

her cheeks, but outwardly, at least, she showed none of the excitement that had seized the crowd; her movements were deliberate and there was a resolute set to her lips. She got through, finally, and halted beside the big man, the crowd closing up behind her. She was swallowed in it, lost to sight.

"Lift her up, Lefingwell!" suggested a man on the outer fringe. "If she's got anything to say, let us all hear it!" The suggestion was caught up, insistently.

"If you ain't got no objections, ma'am," said the big man. He stooped at her cold smile and swung her to his shoulder. She spoke slowly and distinctly, though there was a tremor in her voice:

"Trevison did not kill Braman—it was Corrigan. Corrigan was in my room in the *Castle* last night just after dark. When he left, I watched him from my window, after putting out the light. He had threatened to kill Braman. I watched him cross the street and go around to the rear of the bank building. There was a light in the rear room of the bank. After a while Braman and Corrigan entered the banking room. The light from the rear room shone on them for an instant and I recognized them. They were at the safe. When they went out they left the safe door open. After a while the light went out and I saw Corrigan come from around the rear of the building, recross the street and come into the *Castle*. You men are blind. Corrigan is a crook who will stop at nothing. If you let him injure Trevison for a crime that Trevison did not commit you deserve to be robbed!"

Lefingwell swung her down from his shoulder.

"I reckon that cinches it, boys!" he bellowed over the heads of the men nearest him. "There ain't nothin' plainer! If we stand for this we're a bunch of cowardly coyotes that ain't fit to look Trevison in the face! I'm goin' to help him! Who's comin' along?"

A chorus of shouts drowned his last words; the crowd was in motion, swift, with definite purpose. It melted, streaming off in all directions, like the sweep of water from a bursted dam. It broke at the doors of the buildings; it sought the stables. Men bearing rifles appeared in the street, mounting horses and congregating in front of the *Belmont*, where Lefingwell had gone. Other men, on the board sidewalk and in the dust of the street, were running, shouting, gesticulating. In an instant the town had become a bedlam of portentous force; it was the first time in its history that the people of Manti had looked with collective vision, and the girl reeled against the iron wall of the shed, appalled at the resistless power that had been set in motion. On a night when she sat on the porch of the Bar B ranchhouse she had looked toward Manti, thrilled over a pretty mental fancy. She had thought it all a game—wondrous, joyous, progressive. She had neglected to associate justice with it then—the inexorable rule of fairness under which every player of the game must bow. She brought it into use now, felt the spirit of it, saw the dire tragedy that its perversion portended, groaned, and covered her face with her hands.

She looked around after a while. She saw Judge Lindman walking across the street toward the *Castle*,

supported by two other men. A third followed; she did not know him, but Corrigan would have recognized him as the hotel clerk who had grown confidential upon a certain day. The girl heard his voice as he followed after the Judge and the others—raucous, vindictive:

“We need men like Trevison in this town. We can get along without any Corrigans.”

She heard a voice behind her and she turned, swiftly, to see Hester Harvey walking toward her. She would have avoided the meeting, but she saw that Hester was intent on speaking and she drew herself erect, bowing to her with cold courtesy as the woman stopped within a step of her and smiled.

“You look ready to flop into hysterics, dearie! Won’t you come over to my room with me and have something to brace you up? A cup of tea?” she added with a laugh as Rosalind looked quickly at her. She did not seem to notice the stiffening of the girl’s body, but linked her arm within her own and began to walk across the street. The girl was racked with emotion over the excitement of the morning, the dread of impending violence, and half frantic with anxiety over Trevison’s safety. Hester’s offense against her seemed vague and far, and very insignificant, relatively. She yearned to exchange confidences with somebody—anybody, and this woman, even though she were what she thought her, had a capacity for feeling, for sympathy. And she was very, very tired of it all.

“It was fierce, wasn’t it?” said Hester a few minutes later in the privacy of her room, as she balanced her cup and watched Rosalind as the girl ate, hungrily.

"These sagebrush rough-necks out here will make Corrigan hump himself to keep out of their way. But he deserves it, the crook!"

The girl looked curiously at the other, trying hard to reconcile the vindictiveness of these words and the woman's previous action in giving damaging testimony against Corrigan, with the significant fact that Corrigan had been in her room the night before, presumably as a guest. Hester caught the look and laughed. "Yes, dearie, he deserves it. How much do you know of what has been going on here?"

"Very little, I am afraid."

"Less than that, I suspect. I happen to know considerable, and I am going to tell you about it. My trip out here has been a sort of a wild-goose chase. I thought I wanted Trevison, but I've discovered I'm not badly hurt by his refusal to resume our old relations."

The girl gasped and almost dropped her cup, setting it down slowly afterward and staring at her hostess with doubting, fearing, incredulous eyes.

"Yes, dearie," laughed the other, with a trace of embarrassment; "you can trust your ears on that statement. To make certain, I'll repeat it: I am not very badly hurt by his refusal to resume our old relations. Do you know what that means? It means that he turned me down cold, dearie."

"Do you mean—" began the girl, gripping the table edge.

"I mean that I lied to you. The night I went over to Trevison's ranch he told me plainly that he didn't like me one teenie, weenie bit any more. He wouldn't

kiss me, shake my hand, or welcome me in any way. He told me he'd got over it, the same as he'd got over his measles days—he'd outgrown it and was going to throw himself at the feet of another goddess. Oh, yes, he meant you!" she laughed, her voice a little too high, perhaps, with an odd note of bitterness in it. "Then, determined to blot my rival out, I lied about you. I told him that you loved Corrigan and that you were in the game to rob him of his land. Oh, I blackened you, dearie! It hurt him, too. For when a man like Trevison loves a woman—"

"How could you!" said the girl, shuddering.

"Please don't get dramatic," jeered the other. "The rules that govern the love game are very elastic—for some women. I played it strong, but there was no chance for me from the beginning. Trevison thinks you are Corrigan's trump card in this game. It *is* a game, isn't it. But he loves you in spite of it all. He told me he'd go to the gallows for you. Aren't men the sillies! But just the same, dearie, we women like to hear them murmur those little heroic things, don't we? It was on the night I told him you'd told Corrigan about the dynamiting."

"Oh!" said the girl.

"That was my high card," laughed the woman, harshly. "He took it and derided me. I decided right then that I wouldn't play any more."

"Then he didn't send for you?"

"Corrigan did that, dearie."

"You—you knew Corrigan before—before you came here?"

"You *can* guess intelligently, can't you?"

"Corrigan planned it *all*?"

"All." Hester watched as the girl bowed her head and sobbed convulsively.

"What a brazen, crafty and unprincipled *thing* Trevison must think me!"

Hester reached out a hand and laid it on the girl's. "I—there was a time when I would have done murder to have him think of me as he thinks of you, dearie. He isn't for me, though, and I can't spoil any woman's happiness. There's little enough—but I'm not going to philosophize. I was going away without telling you this. I don't know why I am telling it now. I always was a little soft. But if you hadn't spoken as you did a while ago in that crowd—taking Trevison's end—I—I think you'd never have known. Somehow, it seemed you deserved him, dearie. And I couldn't bear to—to think of him facing any more disappointment. He—he took it so—"

The girl looked up, to see the woman's eyes filling with a luminous mist. A quick conception of what this all meant to the woman thrilled the girl. She got up and walked to the woman's side. "I'm *so* sorry, Hester," she said as her arms stole around the other's neck.

She went out a little later, into the glaring, shimmering sunlight of the morning, her cheeks red, her eyes aglow, her heart racing wildly, to see an engine and a luxurious private car just pulling from the main track to a switch.

"Oh," she whispered, joyously; "it's father's!"

And she ran toward it, tingling with a new-found hope.

In her room at the *Castle* sat a woman who was finding the world very empty. It held nothing for her except the sad consolation of repentance.

CHAPTER XXVII

THE FIGHT

"THE boss is sure a she-wolf at playin' a lone hand," growled Barkwell, shortly after dusk, to Jud Weaver, the straw boss. "Seems he thinks his friends is delicate ornaments which any use would bust to smithereens. Here's his outfit layin' around, bitin' their finger nails with ongrow an' pinin' away to slivers yearnin' to get into the big meal-lee, an' him racin' an' tearin' around the country fightin' it out by his lonesome. I call it rank selfishness!"

"He sure ought to have give us a chanest to claw the hair outen that damned Corrigan feller!" complained Weaver. "In some ways, though, I'm sorta glad the damned mine was blew up. 'Firebrand' would have sure got a-hold of her some day, an' then we'd be clawin' at the bowels of the earth instid of galivan'in' around on our cayuses like gentlemen. I reckon things is all for the best."

The two had come in from the river range ostensibly to confer with Trevison regarding their work, but in reality to satisfy their curiosity over Trevison's movements. There was a deep current of concern for him under their accusations.

They had found the ranchhouse dark and deserted.

But the office door was open and they had entered, prepared supper, ate with a more than ordinary mingling of conversation with their food, and not lighting the lamps had gone out on the gallery for a smoke.

"He ain't done any sleepin' to amount to much in the last forty-eight hours, to my knowin'," remarked Barkwell; "unless he's done his sleepin' on the run—an' that ain't in no ways a comfortable way. He's sure to be driftin' in here, soon."

"This here country's goin' to hell, certain!" declared Weaver, after an hour of silence. "She's gettin' too eastern an' flighty. Railroads an' dams an' hotels with bath tubs for every six or seven rooms, an' resteraunts with filleedegree palms an' leather chairs an' slick eats is eatin' the gizzard outen her. Railroads is all right in their place—which is where folks ain't got no cayuses to fork an' therefore has to hoof it—or—or ride the damn railroad."

"Correct!" agreed Barkwell; "she's a-goin' the way Rome went—an' Babylone—an' Cincinnati—after I left. She runs to a pussy-cafe aristocracy—an' napkins."

"She'll be plumb ruined—follerin' them foreign styles. The Uhmerican people ain't got no right to adopt none of them new-fangled notions." Weaver stared glumly into the darkening plains.

They aired their discontent long. Directed at the town it relieved the pressure of their resentment over Trevison's habit of depending upon himself. For, secretly, both were interested admirers of Manti's growing importance.

Time was measured by their desires. Sometime before midnight Barkwell got up, yawned and stretched.

"Sleep suits me. If 'Firebrand' ain't reckonin' on a guardian, I ain't surprisin' him none. He's mighty close-mouthed about his doin's, anyway."

"You're shoutin'. I ain't never seen a man any stingier about hidin' away his doin's. He just nacherly hawgs all the trouble."

Weaver got up and sauntered to the far end of the gallery, leaning far out to look toward Manti. His sharp exclamation brought Barkwell leaping to his side, and they both watched in perplexity a faint glow in the sky in the direction of the town. It died down as they watched.

"Fire — looks like," Weaver growled. "We're always too late to horn in on any excitement."

"Uh, huh," grunted Barkwell. He was staring intently at the plains, faintly discernable in the starlight. "There's horses out there, Jud! Three or four, an' they're comin' like hell!"

They slipped off the gallery into the shadow of some trees, both instinctively feeling of their holsters. Standing thus they waited.

The faint beat of hoofs came unmistakably to them. They grew louder, drumming over the hard sand of the plains, and presently four dark figures loomed out of the night and came plunging toward the gallery. They came to a halt at the gallery edge, and were about to dismount when Barkwell's voice, cold and truculent, issued from the shadow of the trees:

"What's eatin' you guys?"

There was a short, pregnant silence, and then one of the men laughed.

"Who are you?" He urged his horse forward. But he was brought to a quick halt when Barkwell's voice came again:

"Talk from where you are!"

"That goes," laughed the man. "Trevison here?"

"What you wantin' of him?"

"Plenty. We're deputies. Trevison burned the courthouse and the bank tonight—and killed Braman. We're after him."

"Well, he ain't here." Barkwell laughed. "Burned the courthouse, did he? An' the bank? An' killed Braman? Well, you got to admit that's a pretty good night's work. An' you're wantin' him!" Barkwell's voice leaped; he spoke in short, snappy, metallic sentences that betrayed passion long restrained, breaking his self-control. "You're deputies, eh? Corrigan's whelps! Sneaks! Coyotes! Well, you slope—you hear? When I count three, I down you! One! Two! Three!"

His six-shooter stabbed the darkness at the last word. And at his side Weaver's pistol barked viciously. But the deputies had started at the word "One," and though Barkwell, noting the scurrying of their horses, cut the final words sharply, the four figures were vague and shadowy when the first pistol shot smote the air. Not a report floated back to the ears of the two men. They watched, with grim pouts on their lips, until the men vanished in the star haze of the plains. Then Barkwell spoke, raucously:

"Well, we've broke in the game, Jud. We're Simon-pure outlaws — like our boss. I got one of them scum — I seen him grab leather. We'll all get in, now. They're after our boss, eh? Well, damn 'em, we'll show 'em! They's eight of the boys on the south fork. You **get** 'em, bring 'em here an' get rifles. I'll hit the breeze to the basin an' rustle the others!" He was running at the last word, and presently two horses raced out of the corral gates, clattered past the bunkhouse and were swallowed in the vast, black space.

Half an hour later the entire outfit—twenty men besides Barkwell and Weaver—left the ranchhouse and spread, fan-wise, over the plains west of Manti.

They lost all sense of time. Several of them had ridden to Manti, making a round of the places that were still open, but had returned, with no word of Trevison. Corrigan had claimed to have seen him. But then, a man told his questioner, Corrigan claimed Trevison had choked the banker to death. He could believe both claims, or neither. So far as the man himself was concerned, he was not going to commit himself. But if Trevison had done the job, he'd done it well. The seekers after information rode out of Manti on the run. At some time after midnight the entire outfit was grouped near Clay Levins' house.

They held a short conference, and then Barkwell rode forward and hammered on the door of the cabin.

"We're wantin' Clay, ma'am," said Barkwell in answer to the scared inquiry that filtered through the closed door. "It's the Diamond K outfit."

"What do you want him for?"

"We was thinkin' that mebbe he'd know where 'Firebrand' is. 'Firebrand' is sort of lost, I reckon."

The door flew open and Mrs. Levins, like a pale ghost, appeared in the opening. "Trevison and Clay left here tonight. I didn't look to see what time. Oh, I hope nothing has happened to them!"

They quieted her fears and fled out into the plains again, charging themselves with stupidity for not being more diplomatic in dealing with Mrs. Levins. During the early hours of the morning they rode again to the Diamond K ranchhouse, thinking that perhaps Trevison had slipped by them and returned. But Trevison had not returned, and the outfit gathered in the timber near the house in the faint light of the breaking dawn, disgusted, their horses jaded.

"It's mighty hard work tryin' to be an outlaw in this damned dude-ridden country," wailed the disappointed Weaver. "Outlaws usual have a den or a cave or a mountain fastness, or somethin', anyhow—accordin' to all the literchoor I've read on the subject. If 'Firebrand's' got one, he's mighty bashful about mentionin' it."

"Oh, Lord!" exclaimed Barkwell, weakly. "My brains is sure ready for the mourners! Where's 'Firebrand'? Why, where would you expect a man to be that'd burned up a courthouse an' a bank an' salivated a banker? He'd be hidin' out, wouldn't he, you mis'able box-head! Would he come driftin' back to the home ranch, an' come out when them damn deputies come along, bowin' an' scrapin' an' sayin': 'I'm here, gentle-

men—I've been waitin' for you to come an' try the rope on me, so's you'd be sure to get a good fit!' Would he? You're mighty right he—wouldn't! He'd be populatin' that old pueblo that he's been tellin' me for years would make a good fort!" His horse leaped as he drove the spurs in, cruelly, but at the distance of a hundred yards he was not more than a few feet in advance of the others—and they, disregarding the rules of the game—were trying to pass him.

"There ain't a bit of sense of takin' any risk," objected Levins from the security of the communal chamber, as Trevison peered cautiously around a corner of the adobe house. "It'd be just the luck of one of them critters if they'd pot you."

"I'm not thinking of offering myself as a target for them," the other laughed. "They're still there," he added a minute later as he stepped into the chamber. "Them shooting you as they did, without warning, seems to indicate that they've orders to wipe us out, if possible. They're deputies. I bumped into Corrigan right after I left the bank building, and I suppose he has set them on us."

"I reckon so. Seems it ain't possible, though," Levins added, doubtfully. "They was here before you come. Your Nigger horse ain't takin' no dust. I reckon you didn't stop anywheres?"

"At the Bar B." Trevison made this admission with some embarrassment.

But Levins did not reproach him—he merely groaned, eloquently.

Trevison leaned against the opening of the chamber. His muscles ached; he was in the grip of a mighty weariness. Nature was protesting against the great strain that he had placed upon her. But his jaws set as he felt the flesh of his legs quivering; he grinned the derisive grin of the fighter whose will and courage outlast his physical strength. He felt a pulse of contempt for himself, and mingling with it was a strange elation—the thought that Rosalind Benham had strengthened his failing body, had provided it with the fuel necessary to keep it going for hours yet—as it must. He did not trust himself to yield to his passions as he stood there—that might have caused him to grow reckless. He permitted the weariness of his body to soothe his brain; over him stole a great calm. He assured himself that he could throw it off any time.

But he had deceived himself. Nature had almost reached the limit of effort, and the inevitable slow reaction was taking place. The tired body could be forced on for a while yet, obeying the lethargic impulses of an equally tired brain, but the break would come. At this moment he was oppressed with a sense of the unreality of it all. The pueblo seemed like an ancient city of his dreams; the adobe houses details of a weird phantasmagoria; his adventures of the past forty-eight hours a succession of wild imaginings which he now reviewed with a sort of detached interest, as though he had watched them from afar.

The moonlight shone on him; he heard Levins exclaim sharply: "Your arm's busted, ain't it?"

He started, swayed, and caught himself, laughing

lowly, guiltily, for he realized that he had almost fallen asleep, standing. He held the arm up to the moonlight, examining it, dropping it with a deprecatory word. He settled against the wall near the opening again.

"Hell!" declared Levins, anxiously, "you're all in!"

Trevison did not answer. He stole along the outside wall of the adobe house and peered out into the plains. The men were still where they had been when the shot had been fired, and the sight of them brought a cold grin to his face. He backed away from the corner, dropped to his stomach and wriggled his way back to the corner, shoving his rifle in front of him. He aimed the weapon deliberately, and pulled the trigger. At the flash a smothered cry floated up to him, and he drew back, the thud of bullets against the adobe walls accompanying him.

"That leaves seven, Levins," he said grimly. "Looks like my trip to Santa Fe is off, eh?" he laughed. "Well, I've always had a yearning to be besieged, and I'll make it mighty interesting for those fellows. Do you think you can cover that slope, so they can't get up there while I'm reconnoitering? It would be certain death for me to stick my head around that corner again."

At Levins' emphatic affirmative he was helped to the shelter of a recess, from where he had a view of the slope, though himself protected by a corner of one of the houses; placed a rifle in the wounded man's hands, and carrying his own, vanished into one of the dark passages that weaved through the pueblo.

He went only a short distance. Emerging from an opening in one of the adobe houses he saw a parapet

wall, sadly crumpled in spots, facing the plains, and he dropped to his hands and knees and crept toward it, secreting himself behind it and prodding the wall cautiously with the barrel of his rifle until he found a joint in the stone work where the adobe mud was rotted. He poked the muzzle of the rifle through the crevice, took careful aim, and had the satisfaction of hearing a savage curse in the instant following the flash. He threw himself flat immediately, listening to the spatter and whine of the bullets of the volley that greeted his shot. They kept it up long—but when there was a momentary cessation he crept back to the entrance of the adobe house, entered, followed another passage and came out on the ledge farther along the side of the pueblo. He halted in a dense shadow and looked toward the spot where the men had been. They had vanished.

There was nothing to do but to wait, and he sank behind a huge block of stone in an angle of the ledge, noting with satisfaction that he could see the slope that he had set Levins to guard.

"I'm the boss of this fort if I don't go to sleep," he told himself grimly as he stretched out. He lay there, watching, while the moonlight faded, while a gray streak in the east slowly widened, presaging the dawn. Stretched flat, his aching muscles welcoming the support of the cool stone of the ledge, he had to fight off the drowsiness that assailed him.

An hour dragged by. He knew the deputies were watching, no doubt having separated to conceal themselves behind convenient boulders that dotted the plains

at the foot of the slope. Or perhaps while he had been in the passages of the pueblo, changing his position, some of them might have stolen to the numerous crags and outcroppings of rock at the base of the pueblo. They might now be massing for a rush up the slope. But he doubted they would risk the latter move, for they knew that he must be on the alert, and they had cause to fear his rifle.

Once he rested his head on his extended right arm, and the contact was so agreeable that he allowed it to remain there—long. He caught himself in time; in another second he would have been too late. He saw the figure of a man on the slope a foot or two below the crest. He was flat on his stomach, no doubt having crept there during the minutes that Trevison had been enjoying his rest, and at the instant Trevison saw him he was raising his rifle, directing it at the recess where Levins had been left, on guard.

Trevison was wide awake now, and his marksmanship as deadly as ever. He waited until the man's rifle came to a level. Then his own weapon spat viciously. The man rose to his knees, reeling. Another rifle cracked—from the recess where Levins was concealed, this time—and the man sank to the dust of the slope, rolling over and over until he reached the bottom, where he stretched out and lay prone. There was a shout of rage from a section of rock-strewn level near the foot of the slope, and Trevison's lips curled with satisfaction. The second shot had told him that a fear he had entertained momentarily was unfounded—Levins was apparently quite alive.

He raised himself cautiously, backed away from the rock behind which he had been concealed, and wheeled, intending to join Levins. A faint sound reached his ears from the plains, and he faced around again, to see a group of horsemen riding toward the pueblo. They were coming fast, racing ahead of a dust cloud, and were perhaps a quarter of a mile distant. But Trevison knew them, and stepped boldly out to the edge of the stone ledge waving his hat to them, laughing full-throatedly, his voice vibrating a little as he spoke:

“Good old Barkwell!”

“That’s him!”

Barkwell pulled his horse to a sliding halt as he saw the figure on the pueblo, outlined distinctly in the clear white light of the dawn.

“He’s all right!” he declared to the others as they followed his example and drew their beasts down. “Them’s some of the scum that’s been after him,” he added as several horsemen swept around the far side of the pueblo. “It was them we heard shootin’.” The outfit sat silent on their horses and watched the men ride over the plains toward another group of horsemen that the Diamond K men had observed some time before riding toward the pueblo.

“Yep!” Barkwell said, now; “that other bunch is deputies, too. It’s mighty plain. This bunch rounded up ‘Firebrand’ an’ sent some one back for reinforcements.” He swept the Diamond K outfit with a snarling smile. “They’re goin’ to need ‘em, too! I reckon we’d better wait for them to play their hand. It’s about

a stand off in numbers. We don't stand no slack, boys. We're outlawed already, from the rukus of last night, an' if they start anything we've got to wipe 'em out! You heard 'em shootin' at the boss, an' they ain't no pussy-kitten bunch! I'll do the gassin' — if there's any to be done — an' when I draw, you guys do your damnedest!"

The outfit set itself to wait. Over on the edge of the pueblo they could see Trevison. He was bending over something, and when they saw him stoop and lift the object, heaving it to his shoulder and walking away with it, a sullen murmur ran over the outfit, and lips grew stiff and white with rage.

"It's Clay Levins, boys!" said Barkwell. "They've plugged him! Do you reckon we've got to go back to Levins' shack an' tell his wife that we let them skunks get away after makin' orphans of her kids?"

"I'm jumpin'!" shrieked Jud Weaver, his voice coming chokingly with passion. "I ain't waitin' one damned minute for any palaver! Either them deputies is wiped out, or I am!" He dug the spurs into his horse, drawing his six-shooter as the animal leaped.

Weaver's horse led the outfit by only three or four jumps, and they swept over the level like a devastating cyclone, the spiral dust cloud that rose behind them following them lazily, sucked along by the wind of their passing.

The group of deputies had halted; they were sitting tense and silent in their saddles when the Diamond K outfit came up, slowing down as they drew nearer, and halting within ten feet of the others, spreading out in

a crude semi-circle, so that each man had an unobstructed view of the deputies.

Barkwell had no chance to talk. Before he could get his breath after pulling his horse down, Weaver, his six-shooter in hand, its muzzle directed fairly at Gieger, who was slightly in advance of his men, fumed forth:

"What in hell do you-all mean by tryin' to herd-ride our boss? Talk fast, you eagle-beaked turkey buzzard, or I salivates you rapid!"

The situation was one of intense delicacy. Gieger might have averted the threatening clash with a judicious use of soft, placating speech. But it pleased him to bluster.

"We are deputies, acting under orders from the court. We are after a murderer, and we mean to get him!" he said, coldly.

"Deputies! Hell!" Barkwell's voice rose, sharply scornful and mocking. "Deputies! Crooks! Gun-fighters! Pluguglies!" His eyes, bright, alert, gleaming like a bird's, were roving over the faces in the group of deputies. "A damn fine bunch of guys to represent the law! There's Dakota Dick, there! Tin-horn, rustler! There's Red Classen! Stage robber! An' Pepper Ridgely, a plain, ornery thief! An' Kid Dorgan, a sneakin' killer! An' Buff Keller, an' Andy Watts, an' Pig Mugley, an'—oh, hell! Deputies! Law!——Ah—hah!"

One of the men had reached for his holster. Weaver's gun barked twice and the man pitched limply forward to his horse's neck. Other weapons flashed:

the calm of the early morning was rent by the hoarse, guttural cries of men in the grip of the blood-lust, the sustained and venomous popping of pistols, the queer, sodden impact of lead against flesh, the terror-snorts of horses, and the grunts of men, falling heavily.

A big man in khaki, loping his horse up the slope of an arroyo half a mile distant, started at the sound of the first shot and raced over the crest. He pulled the horse to an abrupt halt as his gaze swept the plains in front of him. He saw riderless horses running frantically away from a smoking blot, he saw the blot streaked with level, white smoke-spurts that ballooned upward quickly; he heard the dull, flat reports that followed the smoke-spurts.

It seemed to be over in an instant. The blot split up, galloping horses and yelling men burst out of it. The big man had reached the crest of the arroyo at the critical second in which the balance of victory wavers uncertainly. With thrusting chin, lips in a hideous pout, and with sullen, blazing eyes, he watched the battle go against him. Fifteen cowboys—he counted them, deliberately, coldly, despite the rage-mania that had seized him—were spurring after eight other men whom he knew for his own. As he watched he saw two of these tumble from their horses. And at a distance he saw the loops of ropes swing out to enmesh four more—who were thrown and dragged; he watched darkly as the remaining two raised their hands above their heads. Then his lips came out of their pout and were wreathed in a bitter snarl.

"Licked!" he muttered. "Twelve put out of business. But there's thirty more—if the damn fools have come in to town! That's two to one!" He laughed, wheeled his horse toward Manti, rode a few feet down the slope of the arroyo, halted and sat motionless in the saddle, looking back. He smiled with cold satisfaction. "Lucky for me that cinch strap broke," he said.

Trevison was placing Levins' limp form across the saddle on Nigger's back when the faint morning breeze bore to his ears the report of Weaver's pistol. A rattling volley followed the first report, and Trevison led Nigger close to the edge of the ledge in time to observe the battle as Corrigan had seen it. He hurried Nigger down the slope, but he had to be careful with his burden. Reaching the level he lifted Levins off, laid him gently on the top of a huge flat rock, and then leaped into the saddle and sent Nigger tearing over the plains toward the scene of the battle.

It was over when he arrived. A dozen men were lying in the tall grass. Some were groaning, writhing; others were quiet and motionless. Four or five of them were arrayed in chaps. His lips grimmed as his gaze swept them. He dismounted and went to them, one after another. He stooped long over one.

"They've got Weaver," he heard a voice say. And he started and looked around, and seeing no one near, knew it was his own voice that he heard. It was dry and light—as a man's voice might be who has run far and fast. He stood for a while, looking down at

Weaver. His brain was reeling, as it had reeled over on the ledge of the pueblo a few minutes before, when he had discovered a certain thing. It was not a weakness; it was a surge of reviving rage, an accession of passion that made his head swim with its potency, made his muscles swell with a strength that he had not known for many hours. Never in his life had he felt more like crying. His emotions seared his soul as a white-hot iron sears the flesh; they burned into him, scorching his pity and his impulses of mercy, withering them, blighting them. He heard himself whining sibilantly, as he had heard boys whine when fighting, with eagerness and lust for blows. It was the insensate, raging fury of the fight-madness that had gripped him, and he suddenly yielded to it and raised his head, laughing harshly, with panting, labored breath.

Barkwell rode up to him, speaking hoarsely: "We come pretty near wipin' 'em out, 'Firebrand!'"

He looked up at his foreman, and the latter's face blanched. "God!" he said. He whispered to a cowboy who had joined him: "The boss is pretty near loco—looks like!"

"They've killed Weaver," muttered Trevison. "He's here. They killed Clay, too—he's down on a rock near the slope." He laughed, and tightened his belt. The record book which he had carried in his waistband all along interfered with this work, and he drew it out, throwing it from him. "Clay was worth a thousand of them!"

Barkwell got down and seized the book, watching Trevison closely.

"Look here, Boss," he said, as Trevison ran to his horse and threw himself into the saddle; "you're bushed, mighty near—"

If Trevison heard his first words he had paid no attention to them. He could not have heard the last words, for Nigger had lunged forward, running with great, long, catlike leaps in the direction of Manti.

"Good God!" yelled Barkwell to some of the men who had ridden up; "the damn fool is goin' to town! They'll salivate him, sure as hell! Some of you stay here—two's enough! The rest of you come along with me!"

They were after Trevison within a few seconds, but the black horse was far ahead, running without hitch or stumble, as straight toward Manti as his willing muscles and his loyal heart could take him.

Corrigan had seen the black bolt that had rushed toward him out of the spot where the blot had been. He cursed hoarsely and drove the spurs deep into the flanks of his horse, and the animal, squealing with pain and fury, leaped down the side of the arroyo, crossed the bottom in two or three bounds and stretched away toward Manti.

A cold fear had seized the big man's heart. It made a sweat break out on his forehead, it caused his hand to tremble as he flung it around to his hip in search of his pistol. He tried to shake the feeling off, but it clung insistently to him, making him catch his breath. His horse was big, rangy, and strong, but he forced it to such a pace during the first mile of the ride that he

could feel its muscles quivering under the saddle skirts. And he looked back at the end of the mile, to see the black horse at about the same distance from him; possibly the distance had been shortened. It seemed to Corrigan that he had never seen a horse that traveled as smoothly and evenly as the big black, or that ran with as little effort. He began to loathe the black with an intensity equaled only by that which he felt for his rider.

He held his lead for another mile. Glancing back a little later he noted with a quickening pulse that the distance had been shortened by several hundred feet, and that the black seemed to be traveling with as little effort as ever. Also, for the first time, Corrigan noticed the presence of other riders, behind Trevison. They were topping a slight rise at the instant he glanced back, and were at least a mile behind his pursuer.

At first, mingled with his fear, Corrigan had felt a slight disgust for himself in yielding to his sudden panic. He had never been in the habit of running. He had been as proud of his courage as he had been of his cleverness and his keenness in planning and plotting. It had been his mental boast that in every crisis his nerve was coldest. But now he nursed a vagrant, furtive hope that waiting for him at Manti would be some of those men whom he had hired at his own expense to impersonate deputies. The presence of the hope was as inexplicable as the fear that had set him to running from Trevison. Two or three weeks ago he would have faced both Trevison and his men and brazened it out. But of late a growing dread of the

man had seized him. Never before had he met a man who refused to be beaten, or who had fought him as recklessly and relentlessly.

He jeered at himself as he rode, telling himself that when Trevison got near enough he would stand and have it out with him—for he knew that the fight had narrowed down between them until it was as Trevison had said, man to man—but as he rode his breath came faster, his backward glances grew more frequent and fearful, and the cold sweat on his forehead grew clammy. Fear, naked and shameful, had seized him.

Behind him, lean, gaunt, haggard; seeing nothing but the big man ahead of him, feeling nothing but an insane desire to maim or slay him, rode a man who in forty-eight hours had been transformed from a frank, guileless, plain-speaking human, to a rage-drunken savage—a monomaniac who, as he leaned over Nigger's mane, whispered and whined and mewed, as his forebears, in some tropical jungle, voiced their passions when they set forth to slay those who had sought to despoil them.

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE DREGS

WHEN the Benham private car came to a stop on the switch, Rosalind swung up the steps and upon the platform just as J. C., ruddy, smiling and bland, opened the door. She was in his arms in an instant, murmuring her joy. He stroked her hair, then held her off for a good look at her, and inquired, unctuously:

“What are you doing in town so early, my dear?”

“Oh!” She hid her face on his shoulder, reluctant to tell him. But she knew he must be told, and so she steeled herself, stepping back and looking at him, her heart pounding madly.

“Father; these people have discovered that Corrigan has been trying to cheat them!”

She would have gone on, but the sickly, ghastly pallor of his face frightened her. She swayed and leaned against the railing of the platform, a sinking, deadly apprehension gnawing at her, for it seemed from the expression of J. C.’s face that he had some knowledge of Corrigan’s intentions. But J. C. had been through too many crises to surrender at the first shot in this one. Still he got a good grip on himself before he attempted to answer, and then his voice was low and intoned with casual surprise:

"Trying to cheat them? How, my dear?"

"By trying to take their land from them. You had no knowledge of it, Father?"

"Who has been saying that?" he demanded, with a fairly good pretense of righteous anger.

"Nobody. But I thought—I— Oh, thank God!"

"Well, well," he bluffed with faint reproach; "things are coming to a pretty pass when one's own daughter is the first to suspect him of wrong-doing."

"I didn't, Father. I was merely—I don't know what I *did* think! There has been so much excitement! Everything is *so* upset! They have blown up the mining machinery, burned the bank and the courthouse; Judge Lindman was abducted and found; Braman was killed—choked to death; the Vigilantes are—"

"Good God!" Benham interrupted her, staggering back against the rear of the coach. "Who has been at the bottom of all this lawlessness?"

"Trevison."

He gasped, in spite of the fact that he had suspected what her answer would be.

"Where is Corrigan? Where's Trevison?" He demanded, his hands shaking. "Answer me! Where are they?"

"I don't know," the girl returned, dully. "They say Trevison is hiding in a pueblo not far from the Bar B. And that Corrigan left here early this morning, with a number of deputies, to try to capture him. And those men—" She indicated the horsemen gathered in front of the *Belmont*, whom he had not seen, "are organizing to go to Trevison's rescue. They

have discovered that Corrigan murdered Braman, though Corrigan accused Trevison."

J. C. flattened himself against the rear wall of the coach and looked with horror upon the armed riders. There were forty or fifty of them now, and others were joining the group. "Where's Judge Lindman?" he faltered. "Can't this lawlessness be stopped?"

"It is only a few minutes ago that Judge Lindman was dragged from a shed into which he had been forced by Corrigan—after being beaten by him. He made a public confession of his part in the attempted fraud, and charged Corrigan with coercing him. Those men are aroused, Father. I don't know what the end will be, but I am afraid—I'm afraid they'll—"

"I shall give the engineer orders to pull my car out of here!" J. C.'s face was chalky white.

"No, no!" cried the girl, sharply. "That would make them think you were— Don't *run*, Father!" she begged, omitting the word which she dreaded to think might become attached to him should he go away, now that some of them had seen him. "We'll stand our ground, Father. If Corrigan has done those things he deserves to be punished!" Her lips, white and stiff, closed firmly.

"Yes, yes," he said; "that's right—we won't run." But he drew her inside, despite her objections, and from a window they watched the members of the Vigilantes gathering, bristling with weapons, a sinister and ominous arm of that law which is the dread and horror of the evil-doer.

There came a movement, concerted, accompanied by

a low rumble as of waves breaking on a rocky shore. It brought the girl out of her chair, through the door and upon the car platform, where she stood, her hands clasped over her breast, her breath coming gaspingly. His knees knocking together, his face the ashen gray of death, Benham stumbled after her. He did not want to go; did not care to see this thing—what might happen—what his terror told him *would* happen; but he was forced out upon the platform by the sheer urge of a morbid curiosity that there was no denying; it had laid hold of his soul, and though he cringed and shivered and tottered, he went out, standing close to the iron rail, gripping it with hands that grew blueish-white around the knuckles; watching with eyes that bulged, his lips twitching over soundless words. For he could not hold himself guiltless in this thing; it could not have happened had he tempered his smug complacency with thoughts of justice. He groaned, gibbering, for he stood on the brink at this minute, looking down at the lashing sea of retribution.

The girl paid no attention to him. She was watching the men down the street. The concerted movement had come from them. Nearly a hundred riders were on the move. Lefingwell, huge, grim, led them down the street toward the private car. For an instant the girl felt a throb of terror, thinking that they might have designs on the man who stood at the railing near her, unable to move—for he had the same thought. She murmured thankfully when they wheeled, and without looking in her direction loped their horses toward a wide, vacant space between some buildings, which led

out into the plains, and through which she had ridden often when entering Manti. Watching the men, shuddering at the ominous aspect they presented, she saw a tremor run through them—as though they all formed one body. They came to a sudden stop. She heard a ripple of sound arise from them, amazement and anticipation. And then, as though with preconcerted design, though she had heard no word spoken, the group divided, splitting asunder with a precision that deepened the conviction of preconcertedness, ranging themselves on each side of the open space, leaving it gaping barrenly, unobstructed—a stretch of windrowed alkali dust, deep, light and feathery.

Silence, like a stroke, fell over the town. The girl saw people running toward the open space, but they seemed to make no noise—they might have been dream people. And then, noting that they all stared in one direction, she looked over their heads. Not more than four or five hundred feet from the open space, and heading directly toward it, thundered a rider on a tall, strong, rangy horse. The beast's chest was foam-flecked, the white lather that billowed around its muzzle was stained darkly. But it came on with heart-breaking effort, giving its rider its all. Behind the first rider came a second, not more than fifty feet distant from the other, on a black horse which ran with no effort, seemingly, sliding along with great, smooth undulations, his mighty muscles flowing like living things under his glossy, somber coat.

The girl saw the man on his back leaning forward, a snarling, terrible grin on his face. She saw the first

rider wheel when he reached the edge of the open space near the waiting Vigilantes, bring his horse to a sliding halt and face toward his pursuer. He clawed at a hip pocket, drawing a pistol that flashed in the first rays of the morning sun—it belched fire and smoke in a continuous stream, seemingly straight at the rider of the black horse. One—two—three—four—five—six times! The girl counted. But the first man's hand wobbled, and the rider of the black horse came on like a demon astride a black bolt, a laugh of bitter derision on his lips. The black did not swerve. Straight and true in his headlong flight he struck the other horse. They went down in a smother of dust, the two horses grunting, scrambling and kicking. The girl had seen the rider of the black horse lunge forward at the instant of impact; he had thrown himself at the other man as she had seen football players launch themselves at players of the opposition, and they had both reeled out of their saddles to disappear in the smother of dust.

Men left the fringe of the living wall flanking the open space and seized the two horses, leading them away. The smother drifted, and the girl screamed at sight of the two raging things that rolled and burrowed in the deep dust of the street.

They got up as she watched them, springing apart, hesitating for an awful instant to sob breath into their lungs; then they rushed together, striking bitter, sledge-hammer blows that sounded like the smashing of flat rocks, falling from a great height, on the surface of water. She shrieked once, wildly, beseeching someone

to stop them, but no man paid any attention to her cry. They sat on their horses, silent, tense, grim, and she settled into a coma of terror, an icy paralysis gripping her. She heard her father muttering incoherently at her side, droning and puling something over and over in a wailing monotone—she caught it after a while; he was calling upon his God—in an hour that could not have been were it not for his own moral flaccidness.

The dust under the feet of the fighting men leveled under their shifting, dragging feet; it bore the print of their bodies where they had lain and rolled in it; erupting volcanoes belched it heavily upward; it caught and gripped their legs to the ankles, making their movements slow and sodden. This condition favored the larger man. He lashed out a heavy fist that caught Trevison full and fair on the jaw, and the latter's face turned ashy white as he sank to his knees. Corrigan stopped to catch his breath before he hurled himself forward, and this respite, brief as it was, helped the other to shake off the deadening effect of the blow. He moved his head slightly as Corrigan swung at it, and the blow missed, its force pulling the big man off his feet, so that he tumbled headlong over his adversary. He was up again in a flash though, for he was fresher than his enemy. They clinched, and stood straining, matching strength against strength, sheer, without trickery, for the madness of murder was in the heart of one and the desperation of fear in the soul of the other, and they thought of nothing but to crush and batter and pound.

Corrigan's strength was slightly the greater, but it

was offset by the other's fury. In the clinch the big man's right hand came up, the heel of the palm shoved with malignant ferocity against Trevison's chin. Corrigan's left arm was around Trevison's waist, squeezing it like a vise, and the whole strength of Corrigan's right arm was exerted to force the other's head back. Trevison tried to slip his head sideways to escape the hold, but the effort was fruitless. Changing his tactics, his breath lagging in his throat from the terrible pressure on it, Trevison worked his right hand into the other's stomach with the force and regularity of a piston rod. The big man writhed under the punishment, dropping his hand from Trevison's chin to his waist, swung him from his feet and threw him from him as a man throws a bag of meal.

He was after him before he landed, but the other writhed and wriggled in the air like a cat, and when the big man reached for him, trying again to clinch, he evaded the arm and landed a crushing blow on the other's chin that snapped his head back as though it were swung from a hinge, and sent him reeling, to his knees in the dust.

The watching girl saw the ring of men around the fighters contract; she saw Trevison dive headlong at the kneeling man; with fingers working in a fury of impotence she swayed at the iron rail, leaning far over it, her eyes strained, her breath bated, constricting her lungs as though a steel band were around them. For she seemed to feel that the end was near.

She saw them, locked in each other's embrace, stagger to their feet. Corrigan's head was wobbling. He

was trying to hold the other to him that he might escape the lashing blows that were driven at his head. The girl saw his hold broken, and as he reeled, catching another blow in the mouth, he swung toward her and she saw that his lips were smashed, the blood from them trickling down over his chin. There was a gleam of wild, despairing terror in his eyes—revealing the dawning consciousness of approaching defeat, complete and terrible. She saw Trevison start another blow, swinging his fist upward from his knee. It landed with a sodden squish on the big man's jaw. His eyes snapped shut, and he dropped soundlessly, face down in the dust.

For a space Trevison stood, swaying drunkenly, looking down at his beaten enemy. Then he drew himself erect with a mighty effort and swept the crowd with a glance, the fires of passion still leaping and smoldering in his eyes. He seemed for the first time to see the Vigilantes, to realize the significance of their presence, and as he wheeled slowly his lips parted in a grin of bitter satisfaction. He staggered around the form of his fallen enemy, his legs bending at the knees, his feet dragging in the dust. It seemed to the girl that he was waiting for Corrigan to get up that he might resume the fight, and she cried out protestingly. He wheeled at the sound of her voice and faced her, rocking back and forth on his heels and toes, and the glow of dull astonishment in his eyes told her that he was now for the first time aware of her presence. He bowed to her, gravely, losing his balance in the effort, reeling weakly to recover it.

And then a crush of men blotted him out—the ring

of Vigilantes had closed around him. She saw Barkwell lunging through the press to gain Trevison's side; she got a glimpse of him a minute later, near Trevison. The street had become a sea of jostling, shoving men and prancing horses. She wanted to get away—somewhere—to shut this sight from her eyes. For though one horror was over, another impended. She knew it, but could not move. A voice boomed hoarsely, commandingly, above the buzz of many others—it was Lefingwell's, and she cringed at the sound of it. There was a concerted movement; the Vigilantes were shoving the crowd back, clearing a space in the center. In the cleared space two men were lifting Corrigan to his feet. He was reeling in their grasp, his chin on his chest, his face dust-covered, disfigured, streaked with blood. He was conquered, his spirit broken, and her heart ached with pity for him despite her horror for his black deeds. The loop of a rope swung out as she watched; it fell with a horrible swish over Corrigan's head and was drawn taut, swiftly, and a hoarse roar of approval drowned her shriek.

She heard Trevison's voice, muttering in protest, but his words, like her shriek, were lost in the confusion of sound. She saw him fling his arms wide, sending Barkwell and another man reeling from him; he reached for the pistol at his side and leveled it at the crowd. Those nearest him shrank, their faces blank with fear and astonishment. But the man with the rope stood firm, as did Lefingwell, grim, his face darkening with wrath.

"This is the law actin' here, 'Firebrand,'" he said,

his voice level. "You've done your bit, an' you're due to step back an' let justice take a hand. This here skunk has outraged every damned rule of decency an' honor. He's tried to steal all our land; he's corrupted our court, nearly guzzled Judge Lindman to death, killed Braman—an' Barkwell says the bunch of plug-uglies he hired to pose as deputies, has killed Clay Levins an' four or five of the Diamond K men. That's plenty. We'd admire to give in to you. We'll do anything else you say. But this has got to be done."

While Lefingwell had been talking two of the Vigilantes had slipped to the rear of Trevison. As Lefingwell concluded they leaped. The arms of one man went around Trevison's neck; the other man lunged low and pinned his arms to his sides, one hand grasping the pistol and wrenching it from his hand. The crowd closed again. The girl saw Corrigan lifted to the back of a horse, and she shut her eyes and hung dizzily to the railing, while tumult and confusion raged around her.

She opened her eyes a little later, to see Barkwell and another man leading Trevison into the front door of the *Castle*. The street around the car was deserted, save for two or three men who were watching her curiously. She felt her father's arms around her, and she was led into the car, her knees shaking, her soul sick with the horror of it all.

Half an hour later, as she sat at one of the windows, staring stonily out in the shimmering sunlight of the street, she saw some of the Vigilantes returning. She shrank back from the window, shuddering.

CHAPTER XXIX

THE CALM

THE day seemed to endure for an age. Rosalind did not leave the car; she did not go near her father, shut up alone in his apartment; she ate nothing, ignoring the negro attendant when he told her that lunch was served, huddled in a chair beside an open window she decided a battle. She saw the forces of reason and justice rout the hosts of hatred and crime, and she got up finally, her face pallid, but resolute, secure in the knowledge that she had decided wisely. She pitied Corrigan. Had it been within her power she would have prevented the tragedy. And yet she could not blame these people. They were playing the game honestly, and their patience had been sadly strained by one player who had persisted in breaking the rules. He had been swept away by his peers, which was as fair a way as any law — any human law — could deal with him. In her own East he would have paid the same penalty. The method would have been more refined, to be sure; there would have been a long legal squabble, with its tedious delays, but in the end Corrigan would have paid. There was a retributive justice for all those who infringed the rules of the game. It had found Corrigan.

At three o'clock in the afternoon she washed her face. The cool water refreshed her, and with reviving spirits she combed her hair, brushed the dust from her clothing, and looked into a mirror. There were dark hollows under her eyes, a haunting, dreading expression in them. For she could not help thinking about what had happened there — down the street where the Vigilantes had gone.

She dropped listlessly into another chair beside a window, this time facing the station. She saw her horse, hitched to the rail at the station platform, where she had left it that morning. *That* seemed to have been days ago! A period of aching calm had succeeded the tumult of the morning. The street was soundless, deserted. Those men who had played leading parts in the tragedy were not now visible. She would have deserted the town too, had it not been for her father. The tragedy had unnerved him, and she must stay with him until he recovered. She had asked the porter about him, and the latter had reported that he seemed to be asleep.

A breeze carried a whisper to her as she sat at the window:

"Where's 'Firebrand' now?" said a voice.

"Sleepin'. The clerk in the *Castle* says he's makin' up for lost time."

She did not bother to try to see the owners of the voices; her gaze was on the plains, far and vast; and the sky, clear, with a pearly shimmer that dazzled her. She closed her eyes. She could not have told how long she slept. She awoke to the light touch of the porter,

and she saw Trevison standing in the open doorway of the car.

The dust of the battle had been removed. An admiring barber had worked carefully over him; a doctor had mended his arm. Except for a noticeable thinness of the face, and a certain drawn expression of the eyes, he was the same Trevison who had spoken so frankly to her one day out on the plains when he had taken her into his confidence. In the look that he gave her now was the same frankness, clouded a little, she thought, by some emotion—which she could not fathom.

"I have come to apologize," he said; "for various unjust thoughts with which I have been obsessed." Before she could reply he had taken two or three swift steps and was standing over her, and was speaking again, his voice vibrant and regretful: "I ought to have known better than to think—what I did—of you. I have no excuses to make, except that I was insane with a fear that my ten years of labor and lonesomeness were to be wasted. I have just had a talk with Hester Harvey, and she has shown me what a fool I have been. She—"

Rosalind got up, laughing lowly, tremulously. "I talked with Hester this morning. And I think—"

"She told you—" he began, his voice leaping.

"Many things." She looked straight at him, her eyes glowing, but they drooped under the heat of his. "You don't need to feel elated over it—there were two of us." She felt that the surge of joy that ran over her would have shown in her face had it not been

for a sudden recollection of what the Vigilantes had done that morning. That recollection paled her cheeks and froze the smile on her lips.

He was watching her closely and saw her face harden. A shadow passed over his own. He thought he could see the hopelessness of staying longer. "A woman's love," he said, gloomily, "is a wonderful thing. It clings through trouble and tragedy—never faltering." She looked at him, startled, trying to solve the enigma of this speech. He laughed, bitterly. "That's what makes a woman superior to mere man. Love exalts her. It makes a savage of a man. I suppose it is 'good-bye.'" He held out a hand to her and she took it, holding it limply, looking at him in wonderment, her heart heavy with regret. "I wish you luck and happiness," he said. "Corrigan is a man in spite of—of many faults. You can redeem him; you—"

"*Is* a man!" Her hand tightened on his; he could feel her tremble. "Why—why—I thought— Didn't they—"

"Didn't they tell you? The fools!" He laughed derisively. "They let him go. They knew I wouldn't want it. They did it for me. He went East on the noon train—quite alive, I assure you. I am glad of it—for your sake."

"For my sake!" Her voice lifted in mingled joy and derision, and both her hands were squeezing his with a pressure that made his blood leap with a longing to possess her. "For *my* sake!" she repeated, and the emphasis made him gasp and stiffen. "For *your* sake—for both of us, Trevison! Oh, what fools we were!

What fools all people are, not to trust and believe!"

"What do you mean?" He drew her toward him, roughly, and held her hands in a grip that made her wince. But she looked straight at him in spite of the pain, her eyes brimming with a promise that he could not mistake.

"Can't you *see*?" she said to him, her voice quavering; "*must* I tell you?"

“BEAU” RAND

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“BEAU” RAND

CHAPTER I

A MAN SPREADS POISON

STANDING, though resting one shoulder against a door-jamb of the bunkhouse, Amos Seddon watched his daughter. The shoulder that rested against the door-jamb was slightly drooped, the left arm hanging limply; the thumb of the right hand was hooked in the cartridge belt that encircled Seddon's waist. That hand, too, was limp, and there was a glum pout on the man's lips.

His thoughts were not pleasant, for they ran to Beaudry Rand, his neighbor, with a virulent savagery that made him ache to use the gun, whose stock lay so near to his limp fingers. Some day, he told himself, he *would* use the gun on Beaudry Rand.

It was not that Rand had done anything to him, particularly; he hated Rand for the things that Rand had *not* done. That paradox was vague and mysterious to those who did not know; but the torture of it was that Seddon feared some persons—besides Rand—*did*

know. And there was not a time when Seddon rode into Ocate that he did not seem to feel there were many of the town's citizens who were secretly laughing at him. And he suspected that those citizens in possession of the secret were wondering why he did not take the boy from Rand.

To be sure, he had kept his affair with the dance-hall girl a secret — so far as any affair of that character may be kept a secret — and he knew he should not have deserted the girl when he did. But the dread and fear of discovery had seized him, and he had taken the stage to Lazette, and from Lazette he had been whisked westward to San Francisco by rail, where he had spent two weeks trying to convince himself that the girl alone was to blame.

On his return to Ocate he found that the girl had died and that the boy had been adopted by Beaudry Rand.

For a while after returning to Ocate Seddon had wondered if the girl had talked. But if she had talked, the citizens of the town were not eager to disseminate the burden of her last words; and as the days passed Seddon began to believe the girl had said nothing. And then one day, meeting Beaudry Rand on the river trail, Seddon discovered that the girl *had* talked — to Rand.

For Rand's words and manner had been most convincing. The picture Rand made that day was still vivid

in Seddon's mind; even now the reviewing of the scene bloated Seddon's face poisonously.

"Seddon, I want a straight talk with you!" had been Rand's greeting. The mirthless smile on the man's lips, and the glittering contempt in his eyes warned Seddon that the other knew of his guilt.

Seddon's bluster had no effect. "She's a liar if she's mixed me up in that deal!" he sneered. "Why, hell's fire! If a man was to be blamed——"

Rand's smile grew saturnine.

"Not that it makes any difference," he interrupted. "I just want you to know—that I know. An' I want you to know this! I'm takin' the boy—understand? He's mine because I adopted him—no one else wantin' to take the responsibility. He ain't to blame because he's here; an' I'm goin' to keep him from knowin' that his daddy is a sneak an' a coyote! I reckon that's all. You can travel when you're ready!"

But that conversation did not end the incident—for Seddon. For so long as Beaudry Rand was alive—if Rand was the only person the dance-hall girl had taken into her confidence—just so long would Seddon be in danger of discovery. For Rand, despite his declared intention of keeping the incident a secret, *might* talk.

And, though Seddon's wife had died some years before and he had no concern for public opinion in Ocate, he did

not want his daughter to know—the girl he was now watching—who stood in the knee-high sagebrush that swept away from the front of the ranchhouse; her tall, lissom figure clear-cut in the white light of the morning, its gracefully rounded lines revealed by the pressure of the slight breeze that whipped her skirts; her hair in a tangle of ravishing disorder; her cheeks suffused with the bloom of health; her eyes drinking in the beauty of the vast, green world that stretched from her feet across the interminable miles to a raggedly picturesque horizon.

His daughter!

Seddon did not want *her* to know. This was the beginning of her fourth day at home—at the Bar S—which she had not seen in as many years—and during those four days Seddon had delicately and subtly probed her character—to discover traits that had both pleased and awed him.

First, he had found a sturdy, uncompromising moral structure with no flexibility toward error. He knew she had inherited that attitude from her mother. And he had found her with an astonishingly clear vision of life and a conception of the meaning of life that had rather startled him, so greatly was it at variance with his own ideas.

"I know, Daddy," she had said when he had attempted to impart some of the wisdom of his experience to her.

“if a person has clean thoughts there will be little danger of error.”

Seddon had not gone very far in that direction; the girl's clear eyes and straight gaze disconcerted him—made him think of the dance-hall girl and the boy—his boy!

After that conversation with his daughter, Seddon became convinced that if she should learn of his escapade with the dance-hall girl she could never give him that affection and respect for which he yearned.

And this morning as he stood watching the girl, he considered Beaudry Rand and the paradox. The things Rand had *not* done were glaringly apparent. Rand had not treated him fairly. Rand had no business to interfere, for it was not Rand's affair. And even if Rand had interfered he should have consulted Seddon before he had done anything. No matter what he had done, the boy was his, and he should have had a word to say about his future.

Rand had not consulted him; Rand had neglected to consider him at all. And Rand would hold the threat of exposure over him, he knew; and if Rand should meet his daughter, and become acquainted with her; if a contrary fate should throw them together upon terms of intimacy—Seddon's brain rioted with passion, and his thoughts became abysmal.

That *could* happen. A man and a girl — neighbors!

But it must not happen. Seddon paled as he left the bunkhouse door and walked to where his daughter stood.

He stood for a time behind her, looking at her, watching her in silence as, unconscious of his presence, she looked far out over the rolling sweep of country at the dim and ragged horizon.

“Ellie!” he said softly.

The girl turned, and flashed a smile at him.

“It’s great to be home, Daddy!” Elation and a sheer joy of living were in her eyes, in her swelling breast, and in the glow of her cheeks as she stood erect, with head thrown back, her body rigid, inhaling the sage-scented breeze.

“You like it, eh?” he said with a smile, though with no enthusiasm.

“Like it? I love it! I feel that I have been cheated out of four years of my life!”

“No one cheats himself by goin’ to school. It’s made a woman of you, Ellie.”

“I *feel* older, Daddy,” she laughed. And then she laid an affectionate hand on his shoulder. “Do you think I am a woman now?”

“Certain.”

“And ‘Ellie,’” she smiled deprecatingly, “is a girl’s name—the name of a young—a very young—girl.

And nicknames—" She paused and met Seddon's gaze.

"Eleanor," surrendered Seddon. "I reckon I'll have to get used to it." He grinned at her. "This is different—after Denver?" he suggested.

"Different? Oh, yes. But it hasn't changed, Daddy!" She gripped his shoulder hard and wheeled him around so that he faced the river trail. Both could see it, winding around low hills, up rises, disappearing into depressions, reappearing again, narrowing as it receded, and finally vanishing altogether into the haze of distance.

"It's miles to that point—where you can't see the trail any more," she said. "How many miles? I have forgotten."

"Twelve." His face hardened, for the trail ran through Beaudry Rand's ranch, the Three Bar.

"Oh, yes!" Her eyes glowed. "I always loved that trail! That big wide stretch there"—indicating a broad, black expanse of timberland that seemed to swallow the trail near the point about which they had been talking—"is the wood you always warned me against, isn't it? Where you said the timber wolves prowled? Are there really wolves in there, or did you just tell me that to keep me from going there—when you wanted me to stay at home?"

"There's wolves in there all right," he said. "There always was. I've lost a good many calves there." His

eyes became savage, his face reddened with passion. "There's worse than wolves around there now," he said gruffly; "there's Beau Rand!"

"'Beau' Rand?" she said, looking sharply at him, and noting the passion in his eyes. "Is that the name of a man or—or a monster?"

"He claims to be a man, I reckon." Seddon's glance toward the timber was baleful. "He owns the Three Bar now—Halsey sold out to him four years ago. Just after your mother died—an' just before you left to go to school at Denver."

"Beau Rand!" The girl repeated the name, her brows furrowing thoughtfully. "Yes, it must have been—but I don't seem to remember. But what an odd name! Beau!" A twinkle of amusement was in her eyes as she looked at her father; and her lips curved with mockery.

"Beau!" she repeated. "Why, that name suggests a man who is popular with women, doesn't it? A fop; a fashion-plate male; a Beau Brummel who wears spats and a high hat, displays enormous expanses of linen; wears lace cuffs and a wig, and is saturated with perfume. A beau, Father! Oh, it can't be that the Three Bar has descended to that!"

"The Three Bar has descended—if that's the way t say it," declared Seddon, with a malignant grin. It pleased him to discover that Eleanor was already prejudiced

against Rand—her attitude would make the task of poisoning her against the man much easier.

“Eleanor,” he continued, “the Three Bar ain’t what it used to be. Not since this man, Rand, bought it. An’ the country ain’t what it used to be—so far as that goes. There never was no trouble—you know that. Me an’ Halsey an’ Link Compton always got along. But lately things is different. The river’s taken to goin’ dry in the middle of the season. For the last three years there’s never been water enough. Last year she was plumb dry durin’ the whole summier. The Two Link—that’s Link Compton’s ranch—an’ the Bar S suffered a heap. There wasn’t any water except in that big natural basin in the river just opposite the Three Bar ranchhouse. There’s always plenty there, for that’s a deep basin, an’ it gets the last trickle of water that runs down the upper gorge.”

“And this Beau—this Rand—wouldn’t permit you and Compton to water your stock there?” The girl’s eyes flashed with indignation.

“As for that,” admitted Seddon, grudgingly, “Rand let us water our stock there. But he was mighty sullen about it.” He told the lie so glibly that the girl, watching him closely, had no doubt of the truth of the statement.

“But that ain’t neither here nor there,” went on Seddon. “Rand don’t raise near the number of cattle we raise; an’ me an’ Compton offered to buy him out at a

figure that would have paid him. He grinned like a hyena an' told us he'd sell out when he got damn good an' ready. Them's his very words."

"Well," said the girl hesitatingly, "I don't know that you could blame him for not selling. But he shouldn't have been so stingy about the water. He must be a grouch!"

"He's worse," said Seddon eagerly. He saw that he had not made a strong case against Rand. "He's worse. Rand hadn't been at the Three Bar very long when someone took to robbin' the stage. An' about that time cattle thieves began to rustle stock around there. Cattle an' horses. There's been hell to pay! The worst of it is nobody can get a line on who's doin' it. Compton an' some more of the ranchers has organized a vigilance committee, which is nosin' around quite considerable. But that ain't helped none—the stealin' of cattle an' horses, an' the robbin' of the stage is still goin' on."

"Compton suspects Rand?" asked the girl.

"Who else is there to suspect!" demanded Seddon. "Stealin' didn't start until Rand bought the Three Bar an' brought a lot of low-down guys there to work for him. They're a hell-raisin' bunch, Eleanor; an' if I was you I'd steer clear of Rand—an' I'd stay away from that timber. For there's worse than wolves prowlin' around there!"

Seddon had aroused the girl's interest; and he could

plainly see that she believed him, for her eyes were glowing with indignation and resentment—and there was a flush on her cheeks and a glint in her eyes which told Seddon that the spirit of resistance to Rand's supposed outlawry was strong within her.

"If they can prove that he is doing those things they should run him out of the country!" she said.

Seddon grinned coldly. "There'll be worse happen to him when they prove up on him!" he declared.

The girl relaxed, and a little shiver ran over her. Tales of violence in which rustlers and other thieves had suffered had not failed to reach her ears.

But Seddon's recital had aroused in her a certain interest in Rand; while his warning about there being "worse than wolves" in the timber near the Three Bar had not affected her in the least. She would go to the timber whenever she took a notion to go—fear of Rand and his men would not deter her.

She spoke a thought that was uppermost in her mind:

"I should like to see that man, Rand. Don't you think that a man who gives so much attention to his personal appearance would hesitate to do the things he is suspected of doing? Beau! Why, Father; it doesn't seem possible!"

"I reckon it ain't his clothes so much," said Seddon. "There ain't nothin' remarkable about them. It's the way

he wears them, most likely; an' his name. His real name's Beaudry Rand. Beaudry's too heavy a name to go carryin' around in this country, an' so the boys begun shortenin' it to Beau.

"An' he don't like it none, at that. Call him Beau to his face an' you can see his eyes sort of chill. He'll stand for it all right, but there'll be a grin on his face that'll make you think of a tiger that's got you into a corner. He's a mean, ornery cuss, an' no mistake!"

She laughed, entirely unimpressed by her father's deprecatory words. Never in her life had she formed an opinion of another upon the basis of a verbal description. And despite Seddon's excellent counterfeit of sincerity, she had detected in his manner a bitter vindictiveness that did not seem to be warranted by the declaration that Rand was merely suspected of being a thief.

She knew her father as a man of strong character, of strong passions that boiled, unrestrained, in him; that he was ruled by his prejudices; and that in this case Rand had undoubtedly aroused his enmity because of his attitude over the question of the precious water.

"What is the man—Rand—like, Father?" she asked.

He saw the gleam of mischief in her eyes—the tolerant, half-incredulous smile on her lips. These signs told him though he had made the case against Rand as strong as he could, she was still in doubt. More—he could see

that she had not been at all impressed with Rand's viciousness — or that if she was impressed, she did not intend to permit her impressions to rule her. She neither believed nor disbelieved her father; she had formed no opinion — Seddon's recital had made no impression upon her, except to arouse her curiosity.

Seddon betrayed a flash of the malignance that seized him whenever he thought of Rand.

"He's a skinny, ugly gawk with pink hair an' an eye like a fish!" he declared. "He's tall an' awkward, with a pigeon chest an' a woman's waist. He's got a nose like an eagle's beak an' a grin like a sneakin' tomcat! That's Rand — Beau Rand!"

"Why, Daddy!" she said, reprovingly, frankly mocking him.

"Look here, Ellie!" said Seddon, earnestly. "He's done me dirt, an' I don't like him. Mebbe he ain't just the buzzard I've described him; but I don't want you to get thick with him — he's poison, sure enough!"

"Thick!" she said. "Why, Father!"

"That's all right, Ellie; I didn't mean that," he said as he placed an arm about her waist and led her toward the house.

CHAPTER II

A TIMBER WOLF

AMOS SEDDON said no more to his daughter about Beaudry Rand. Seddon had caught certain expressions in the girl's eyes during his first talk about the man, and those expressions had warned him that he might talk too much, and thus arouse the girl's suspicions.

Already, he divined from the way she had looked at him several times, she was wondering why he exhibited so much feeling toward Rand. He didn't want her to ask questions, for some of them might have embarrassed him. And so for two days following the talk about the Three Bar owner, he did not again refer to him.

Besides, various activities engaged Seddon's attention. It was the time of the late spring round-up, and Seddon was compelled to spend much of his time with the Bar S outfit. He wanted Eleanor to accompany him on some of his rides, to watch the men at work, but range work was no novelty to the girl, and she smilingly refused.

However, she spent little of her time at the ranchhouse. Her favorite horse—which she had ridden much before leaving the ranch for Denver, four years before—she found had been pasturing during most of the interval of

her absence, and when one morning she went down to the far pasture and looked at him through the rails of the fence, she saw that he had grown fat and slow and old.

She called to him—the old, familiar and peculiar whistle with which she had summoned him years before. He answered, whinnying, approaching the fence haltingly; and when he stuck his muzzle between the rails she patted it and talked to him, renewing their friendship.

But she did not ride him. From the horse corral near the stable she selected a gray, rangy beast, which her father had pointed out to her, recommending him as “reliable.” “Silver,” Seddon had named him.

Silver *was* reliable. It did not take the girl long to discover that. She knew horses, and during her rides she tested the gray animal in various ways; and at last patted him admiringly and confided into his ears that he would “do.”

The four-year interval of her absence had not made the far timber less alluring; nor had she taken her father’s warning seriously. She had never taken the wolf story literally—it had been a childhood bogey by which both her father and mother had tried to keep her from exploring the timber.

For, despite their warnings, she had gone there many times, impressed by its vastness, awed by the solemn silence that reigned there; a religious reverence stealing

over her whenever she traversed its majestic aisles, with the towering, tapering trees, like cathedral spires, thrusting into the azure blue above.

On this morning—three days after Seddon had talked to her about Beaudry Rand, she watched her father mount his horse and ride away. Shortly after he vanished westward to join the outfit she saddled Silver and headed him toward the river trail.

Familiar landmarks came into view as she rode. She did not travel fast, for there were some things she wished to see—a shady nook at the edge of a sheer butte that fringed the river, where she had spent many hours; a “hole” in the river, far down in a shallow cañon—where she had bathed, with no danger of discovery; and other well-remembered places with which were connected incidents that were still vivid in her recollection.

This tour of memory-exploration took time. It was nearly noon when she reached the edge of the timber, and she smilingly reflected that she had consumed several hours in riding about twelve miles.

Memories thrilled her as she entered the timber—following a faint trail that she remembered well—for she had not seen the timber in four years. Those four years, she saw, had not brought much change in the aspect of the forest. Over here, as she entered a narrow aisle and sent Silver loping along it, descended the atmosphere of

mystery that had always encompassed her—the lingering, whispering, sighing voices of the trees, bearing a threat or a promise—she had never been able to decide which.

She spent some hours in the forest; though she penetrated no farther than she had gone many times in the past. For she rode only those trails she remembered—cattle paths, made by refractory steers that insisted upon betraying yearnings to revert to type.

She reflected that some of the most marvelous profanity she had ever heard had been provoked among the Bar S men by the predilection of some range steers for the mazes and tangle of timber. When they went in—as some of them would—the men had to get them out.

It was a vast forest. Eleanor had never ridden far enough eastward to reach its edge in that direction; though she had almost attained its northern radius—and she always entered the timber from the south.

And she did not attempt today to reach the eastern limits; she rode as far as she had ridden other times, and twice almost lost herself—for most of the trails she had known were overgrown with wild brush and carpeted with the fallen leaves of past seasons, and she had some trouble to find them.

She was in no hurry. Her father, she knew, would not return until late in the evening—probably not until

late tomorrow, for she had heard him tell the straw-boss that the distance to where the outfit was going was "pretty far." So she had no fear that he would discover where she had gone.

As for that she was nearly twenty, and the spirit of independence in her had grown and flourished during her four years' absence. She had always been self-reliant. Not aggressively self-reliant—she disliked a mannish woman. She preferred to feel that she was merely confident—confident of her ability to take care of herself. Certainly she had spirit enough to demonstrate that trait—her trip to the timber despite her father's warning proved that!

She smiled, remembering her father's gravity.

"Worse than wolves," he had said; "there's Beau Rand!"

Her smile grew. Beau Rand, according to her father, might be some prehistoric monster roaming the timber, seeking to devour pygmy humans—herself especially! She laughed aloud.

Later, reaching a small clearing where some wild flowers grew, delicately tinted, their stems frail and transparent, she dismounted and began to gather them.

Engrossed in the task, the bunch of tinted beauties in her hand growing larger and larger, she spent much time in the clearing—more time than she realized. For when

after a while, she stood erect, satisfied with the size of the fragrant bunch in her hands, she discovered that Silver was nowhere to be seen!

She gasped, astonishment confounding her, until she remembered that she had forgotten to trail the reins over Silver's head!

Every range horse expected that; no range horse would stand if the reins were not trailed, unless he had been carefully trained otherwise. They were taught, during their training days, to fear the rope, and no range horse would walk far with the reins at his hoofs. She had forgotten that; her four years' absence from the Bar S had robbed her of that most essential, and very common knowledge.

She dropped the flowers—for the stern business of getting out of the timber would fully occupy her mind and energy for some time, if Silver had strayed far—and ran to the western edge of the clearing, leaping to the trunk of a fallen tree.

From this vantage point she looked southward—toward the Bar S—which direction the horse would naturally take had he decided to desert her. Far down a narrow aisle, fully a quarter of a mile away, she saw a gray shape moving among the trees.

It was Silver, idly browsing—she could see his neck slanting downward, and his tail swishing back and forth.

She gulped with thankfulness, leaped down from the fallen tree trunk, and began to run toward Silver, her face a trifle pale and her eyes filled with a wistful expression.

But she had not taken more than three or four steps toward the horse when she halted and stood rigid, catching her breath with a shrill gasp; her face whitening, her eyes filled with horror. For not more than a dozen paces from her, and directly in the narrow aisle through which she must go to reach Silver, stood a huge, gray timber wolf, his mouth open, his jaws agape, slavering; his eyes flaming with a fire which, she knew, was a sign of the malignant ferocity that had set him across her path.

She did not know how long she stood there, watching the great gray beast. She knew that the wolf did not move, but stood there returning her gaze, its sides heaving with its rapid breaths, its tongue hanging far out of its mouth—the fangs bared a little in a hideous, grinning smirk. It seemed to her that the animal knew of her helplessness and was mocking her, content to wait, certain that she could not escape.

She did not move—she was convinced that if she made the slightest motion the beast would leap. Nor did she permit her gaze to wander for the slightest fraction of a second from the beast's eyes. She stood that way for, it seemed, many minutes; her breath catching in her throat,

her heart pounding, and her nerves tingling with the horror of it.

And then she heard a sharp sound near—the crackling of a twig or a branch, it seemed. She saw the wolf raise its head, snap its ears erect and look past her—a little to her right. The fur on its neck bristled, as though it saw something that aroused it to a fighting resentment, or a craven, gripping fear. Then it snarled, wheeled, and leaped—away from her.

While its body was in the air the solemn silence of the forest was rent by a splitting, crashing report. The girl saw the wolf collapse in mid-air and come down limply, landing on its head and shoulders; its legs asprawl and jerking spasmodically.

She wheeled, aware that the wolf had received a death wound, to see a man on a big black horse directly behind her. He was lounging in the saddle, a smoking pistol in his right hand. There was a slight smile on his lips, and his eyes were agleam with interest and curiosity.

“You’re scared, ma’am, eh?” he said in a low but distinct voice. “Well, you don’t need to be—now. I reckon Mr. Lobo won’t ever be any deader than he is right this minute.”

Eleanor walked tottering to the fallen tree trunk and sank to it, holding tightly to some barkless branches that projected from it to keep herself from slipping off—

for she knew that she had never been nearer to fainting than at this minute.

Her rescuer watched her with grave concern, the smile having departed. The pistol was still in his hand, and noting that she looked at it wonderingly—as though not quite certain what he intended to do next—he sheathed it—first ejecting the empty shell and replacing it with a loaded one. The pistol in the holster, he looked at her with a straight, level gaze.

"What's happened, ma'am? You sure didn't *walk* into this timber!"

She stood erect now, for she had conquered the faintness that had stolen over her, and smiled at him—though her voice quavered a little when she spoke:

"I stopped to pick some flowers and my horse strayed," she told him.

His eyes gleamed with humor. "You ain't Eastern, ma'am—I can see that. Then how——"

"I forgot. You see, I haven't been home in four years—and I left the reins on Silver's saddle."

"Then he *would* slope," said the man; "there bein' nothin' to stop him, an' him thinkin' that mebbe you didn't need him any more. An' then—when he'd gone—old Lobo thought he'd devil you. It's likely—if you've been in the timber any time—he's been followin' you. Well, he died hungry."

"So he did," she laughed. And then seriously: "I want to thank you. I'm afraid if you hadn't come when you did—" She shivered.

He laughed lowly. "Why, I've been watchin' you for hours, ma'am," he said gravely. "Hangin' around—quite a piece away."

She flushed angrily and stood rigid, facing him. Ready to tell him what she thought of him for spying upon her, she saw a big Bar S brand on the hip of the black horse—her father's brand. And then she knew that her father had distrusted her—had been convinced that she *would* ride to the timber—and that he had set this man to watch her, to see that no harm befell her.

The man saw the resentment shining in her eyes, and his expression became apologetic—so obviously apologetic that her anger vanished and a fugitive smile twitched at the corners of her mouth. The man grinned with her—sensing her forgiveness. But instantly she frowned, determined that though the man had saved her from the wolf he should not be permitted to presume upon his service—for he had been employed to do what he had done.

She wondered, though, even while she looked straight at him with a slightly belligerent gaze—how it happened that her father had selected so striking a cowboy to stand guard over her.

He was not handsome—men were never that, she was convinced—for that would make them seem effeminate. But he was undeniably good-looking. And his steel-gray eyes, now watching her with a glint of humor in them, were also aglimmer with the light of an intelligence that was rare in cowboys she had known—those who had worked for her father, for instance.

He was tall, lithe, and muscular; he looked capable—that was the word that thoroughly described him, she thought—until she began to be affected by the atmosphere of grave and grim deliberation that seemed to envelop him.

The humor which seemed to glint his eyes was, she became convinced as she studied him, oddly mingled with malice, not vicious, but cynical—as though he was continually alert for deceit and trickery.

His gaze was highly disconcerting—she felt that were she a man she would not care to trifle with him. For in his eyes, in the way he moved, and in his attitude, was a lingering threat of cold preparedness—a readiness for anything that might happen.

However, she was indignant because he had admitted he had been watching her, and was not so deeply impressed by him as she might have been had she met him under different circumstances. She raised her chin defiantly.

“So you were watching me. Then, when you asked

me if I had *walked* here, you were merely trying to be humorous, is that it?"

His eyes twinkled. "I wasn't intendin' to tell you." His lips twitched into a smile. "But when you shivered that way, gettin' ready to faint, I just *had* to let you know that you wasn't in any great danger. You see, women ain't got much nerve, ma'am."

"Well," she said scornfully, "so long as there are men in the world I suppose women do not need nerve. I suppose you mean to infer that it was a good thing for me that a *man* happened to be near?"

"Men are sort of handy—sometimes," he grinned.

"Well," she ordered, looking coldly at him, "catch my horse, and don't stand there trying to be amusing. That is not what Father employs you for, is it?"

He bowed, smiled, kicked the black horse in the ribs, and rode down the aisle toward the point where Silver had disappeared.

The girl watched him until he could no longer be seen, and then she again seated herself on the fallen tree trunk and gazed reflectively at the dead body of the wolf.

And now that he had gone, and she was left with the memory of her experience, she realized that, even though he had been employed to watch her, he had rendered valuable service; and that he had been as delicate in his espionage as had been possible.

And he certainly was gentlemanly — for a cowboy; and — hadn't she been a little too severe? He had done what he had been ordered to do — and had done it well; and she had censured him when he deserved commendation.

So her thoughts ran, with the result that when the man reappeared a little later, leading the recreant Silver, her manner toward her rescuer was slightly more gracious. She even smiled at him when he offered to help her mount the horse. And then, when she was in the saddle, and he was lounging in his own, watching her gravely, she said:

"As long as I know you are watching me, I suppose you might as well ride with me. Have you any special orders regarding me?"

At his slow negative she resumed:

"Father warned me against going to the Three Bar. But there is still time, and I am going there. I want you to go with me. That will take the edge off Father's displeasure when he discovers I disregarded his warning. Do you know Beaudry Rand?"

A nod was her answer. It was accompanied by a swift, intent glance, as though he was speculating over her.

"Then you can introduce me!" she said, laughing. "It will be decidedly novel to be formally presented to an outlaw!"

He grinned. "I expect it will, ma'am."

She looked around, perplexity in her eyes.

"I really believe I am lost!" she said. "I have no sense of direction since — since that beast came upon me."

Silently he urged the black horse out of the clearing and sent it westward through the timber. Eleanor, after glancing sharply around, smiled, for she had not really lost her sense of direction — she had merely wanted the man to ride ahead of her so that upon him would rest the burden of finding the trail. For she was tired, though determined to go to the Three Bar — and she wanted to look at the man, for he interested her.

She did not let him get very far in advance of her — there were times when the head of her horse was at the withers of the black. But the man paid no attention to her — seemingly. He rode onward, silent, looking straight ahead; and his apparent lack of interest in her soon irritated her.

She spoke almost sharply to him at last, resentment plain in her voice:

"Are you sure you are going in the right direction?"

"Pretty sure," came the answer. Still he did not look around.

For a time the solemn silence of the forest was not broken except by the whipping tread of their horses' hoofs. Again the man's detached attitude provoked the girl to speech.

"Did Father tell you not to talk to me?" she demanded.

"No."

Silence for a hundred yards. Then —

"Do you know Beaudry Rand well?"

"Pretty well."

"Is he really an outlaw?"

"Some say he is."

"And you — what is your opinion?"

"I ain't expressin' it."

"Oh — you aren't! Well, you have one, I presume?"

"Yes."

"But you won't express it. How odd! I suppose that is because you are afraid Rand would shoot you if he heard you had talked about him?" There was much sarcasm in her voice, provoked by the man's obvious reluctance to talk with her.

He laughed, and his voice floated back to her:

"I ain't afraid of Rand shootin' me."

She believed him. But that conviction did not lessen her resentment. And she persisted, determined to make him talk.

"But Rand *is* considered a dangerous man, isn't he? That is, I mean he has the reputation of being a gunfighter — a cattle rustler, a horse thief, and a stage robber?"

"There's folks that think that about him, I reckon. Who was tellin' you?"

"My father told me," she answered. "He said that Rand was suspected of doing all those things, though there was no evidence against him. The stealing began about the time Rand bought the Three Bar. Link Compton has organized a vigilance committee to endeavor to get evidence against Rand."

This did not seem to interest her escort, for he did not answer, nor did he turn his head. When they began to approach the edge of the timber, and the trail grew wider, she spurred her horse beside his and looked furtively at him. He paid no attention to her—his attitude being that of the respectful employee whose business it was to speak when spoken to.

There was a flash of malice in her eyes—humorous malice. For he was so strikingly good-looking that she suspected he would betray condescension toward those of his fellows less generously endowed by nature. She had heard women make "cattish" remarks about other women, and she supposed men were not unlike her own sex in that regard. At least, if her escort had a weak point it was likely to be just here—and it was worth a trial.

"What do you think of Rand—his appearance, I mean. Is he good-looking or ugly?"

"I'd say he was good-lookin'," he answered, flashing a sharp glance at her.

She was disappointed, for he had not spoken the derogatory word she had expected. Also, she was resentful, for she had wanted him to exhibit a very human trait, and he had not done so.

"That is remarkable," she said.

"What is?" Again his glance rested on her—fleeting; she could not fathom it.

"That you seem to think he is good-looking. Father has a decidedly opposite opinion. Shall I tell you what Father says about him—about his appearance?"

"I ain't particular."

"No-o? Well, perhaps you have heard Father describe him. Father says"—she remembered the words well; she felt she would never forget them—"Rand is a skinny, ugly gawk, with pink hair and an eye like a fish. He's tall and awkward, with a pigeon chest and a woman's waist. He's got a nose like an eagle's beak and a grin like a sneaking tomcat! That's Rand—Beau Rand!"

She succeeded in getting a remarkable touch of her father's venom into the description, and she expected her escort to laugh. But to her astonishment and chagrin when she looked quickly at him she saw that there was no sign of emotion on his face. He might not have heard her.

"That description doesn't coincide with yours, I presume?" she asked.

"No, ma'am." And now his lips curved with a slight, mirthless smile. "I expect it wouldn't please Rand a heap, either."

"There is bad feeling between Rand and Father," she said; "that is evident. Do you know why?"

"I ain't never asked your father about it, ma'am," he answered.

She said nothing more until they reached a broad level beyond the edge of the timber, and were riding at a good pace through some tall bunch grass. Then she said:

"How old is Beaudry Rand?"

"I'd say about thirty."

They had crossed the broad level, and were loping their horses down a rocky, uneven slope that led to the river before the girl spoke again.

"Why do they call him 'Beau'?"

"That's his name, ma'am."

"Did you ever call him that?" she asked. "Because," she went on, noting the sudden flush that came into his cheeks, "Father says that whenever a man calls him Beau to his face he'll look at you like a tiger about to devour you!" She laughed. "You *must* have called him that, judging from your embarrassment—and he must have shown you that he wanted to eat you!" She leaned close to him, intensely curious. "Did you?" she asked.

"I've called him Beau."

"And what did he do?"

"Nothin'."

She straightened with a sigh. "Father said he'd 'stand' for it. If I were a man, and another man profaned my name like that, I'd certainly punish him some way. This man Rand must be a sort of spiritless fellow after all. I had hoped — when I heard about him — that he'd have more gumption."

"I reckon he's a sort of mild critter, ma'am, or he'd not stand for what's bein' said about him. But Rand ain't no trouble-hunter — if that's any use to you."

Thereafter she questioned him no further; for she had seen from the flush on his face that he must have had trouble with Rand — over the nickname, possibly — and she had no desire further to embarrass him. But her resentment over his lack of interest in her still lingered.

She dropped behind him, riding at a little distance, while they traversed the irregular slope to the edge of the deep basin, full of water, about which her father had spoken.

The basin belonged to the Three Bar — the girl recognized it, for she had ridden here many times while the Three Bar was still owned by Halsey — and she saw that what her father had said about the river was true.

When she had left the Bar S there had been considerable water in the river, but now there was a small stream of

it, barely a yard wide, trickling over its rock bed into the basin. And very little water flowed from the southerly end of the basin into the almost dry bed of the river that dropped down into the gorge that ran past the Bar S.

The two horses clattered across a shallow that skirted the basin, reached a gradual rise that began at the basin's edge, and stretched to some level land westward. When they reached the crest of the rise the girl saw the Three Bar buildings farther back, at the edge of a grove of spruce and fir-balsam and cottonwood. The buildings looked no different than they had looked when she had left the country four years before, and she had some difficulty in believing that they were now inhabited by an outlaw.

For the girl's memory was retentive, and while she was riding forward toward the ranch buildings, she kept seeing mental pictures of the Halseys—of Halsey himself, and of his girls—who had chummed with her; and of the Halsey home life—which had been gentle and ideal.

So deeply interested was she with her mental pictures, she had almost forgotten the man who had escorted her out of the timber; and she did not look up until her horse came to a halt of his own volition. Then she started and looked about her, for her escort had dismounted and was standing at the head of her horse, smiling at her.

"You'll find Beaudry Rand in the house."

She reddened; for now that she was here, and the mental pictures had vanished, she realized that she had done a bold and unconventional thing in coming.

"Why," she said; "I—I don't believe, after all, that I care to make Mr. Rand's acquaintance. I thought, perhaps, that if he should happen to be around anywhere—outside, that is—I might like to see him. But to go into the house! Can't you bring him out here?"

"The last I saw of Beaudry Rand, the outlaw, he couldn't do any walkin'," said her escort. His eyes were quizzical and mocking. No doubt he was aware of her sudden trepidation.

"Hurt—do you mean?" she asked. "Well, in any case, I shall not go in."

"Scared?" said the man, derisively, as though daring her.

Her flush deepened, and a reckless impulse seized her.

"No," she declared; "I am not scared." And she laughed at the flash of admiration that lighted the man's eyes.

Dismounting—this time trailing the reins over Silver's head—she followed the man across a broad gallery and into a big, gloomy front room which, she knew, had served the Halseys as a parlor.

Her escort halted midway in the room and pointed to a small picture on the wall—a full-length photograph of

a man in cowboy rigging, with a large, flowing mustache, and a cruel, drooping mouth.

Perplexed, she stared hard at the picture, and then at her escort.

"Why," she said coldly; "is this a hoax? I came in here to see Beaudry Rand, and you show me a photograph!"

He looked gravely at her. "I reckon it ain't a hoax, ma'am. That is a picture of Beaudry Rand, the outlaw. Beaudry Rand, the outlaw, is dead; an' that's all he left to remember him by—exceptin' some mighty excitin' stories that folks will tell you—mostly lies, I reckon."

"But I—I thought Beaudry Rand was alive! Father said he is alive! Why," she added, standing stiffly before him, her eyes flashing, accusation in her voice; "*you* told me—as *much* as told me he was alive! And you said he was about thirty years of age!"

"Beaudry Rand, the outlaw, is dead, ma'am," he repeated gravely. "But Beaudry Rand, his son, is a heap certain that he's a whole lot alive. An' he's about thirty, too, ma'am—as I told you. An' I'd be willin' to swear that he ain't got no pink hair—unless this is pink," he added, running the fingers of one of his hands through the short, dark-brown, virile mass that covered his head.

"An' while I ain't claimin' to be vain, I ain't admittin' that I've got a pigeon chest, an' an eagle-beak nose; an'

I'm right certain I ain't no sneakin' tomcat! As for me bein' awkward, an' a lot of other things that I can't seem to remember—there bein' so much of it—why, you'll have to be the judge of that, ma'am; for you've been lookin' at me quite considerable this afternoon!"

She had started back, and now stood looking at him in dismayed astonishment.

"You!" she said; "you are Beaudry Rand?"

"I'm Beaudry Rand, ma'am," he said gently. And he stood near the center of the room, watching her with a grave smile as she backed through the door, across the porch, and to the steps. At the steps she turned, ran to Silver, mounted hurriedly, and sent the animal racing toward the river trail.

CHAPTER III

THE MAN HIMSELF

FOR perhaps ten minutes following the abrupt departure of Eleanor Seddon, Beaudry Rand stood on the big gallery of the ranchhouse watching the girl as she rode steadily down the river trail. He saw the gray horse cross the long stretch of plain that began at the ranchhouse; he watched while the animal fled over some bare hills; and when at last horse and rider came for an instant into bold relief on the crest of a high ridge that formed the southern sky-line, Rand smiled mirthlessly, walked into the big front room, took the picture of his father from the wall, stuck it under an arm, and strode into another room—his bedroom.

There he removed a bust photograph of a woman from the wall near his bed; and with both pictures—one under his arm and the other in his right hand—he returned to the porch and seated himself in a chair.

Holding the two pictures close together, so that the strong north light shone on them, he studied them.

Had Eleanor Seddon been there to see him, she would have marveled over the swiftly changing expression of Rand's face. For when his gaze rested on the photo-

graph of the woman, his eyes grew wistful, gentle, and worshipful; his lips curved into a smile that was tenderly reminiscent. Again, reverently he kissed the photograph, holding it tightly to his lips, while his face paled and the love-hunger of a loyal son for his dead mother held him in a mighty clutch.

His eyes grew hard and his lips formed two straight, stiff lines when he turned the woman's picture face down on his lap and looked at the photograph of the man. His muscles grew taut, his chin went outward in a vicious thrust, and his eyes gleamed with a cold fire. He sat there, rigid and motionless, while passions, virulent and blighting, seethed through him.

It was not the first time he had held the two pictures together, comparing them; nor was it the first time the passion had gripped him. Since he had been old enough to think for himself he had known what it was to feel the blood-lust gripping him. It had been a heritage from his father—the man of the photograph—this bitter, malignant passion; and it had come upon him when he had been very young—its earliest manifestation had occurred when in his fifteenth year, back in the Durango country—where he had been born—a boy from a neighboring ranch had displeased him. The boy had drawn a gun and, half in jest, half in earnest, he had pointed it at Rand.

Young Rand had worn no gun — his mother had forbidden that. And yet, facing the weapon in the other boy's hand, Rand had yielded to the first bitter, destroying passion that had ever seized him. He had walked straight to the boy — the muzzle of the weapon menacing him, the other boy's finger wavering on the trigger — daring him to shoot.

And when he had seen the cringing indecision in the other's eyes he knocked the weapon from his hand and leaped upon him in demoniac fury.

It had been his mother who had saved him that day — saved him from committing the murder which would have made him like his outlaw father — a conscienceless killer of men.

He had not known then, of course, that he had inherited his violent passions from his father; that the queer, cynical, and malevolent feeling that came over him at sight of another man wearing a six-shooter was a yearning to kill — a lust that his father had bequeathed him.

Later, though, he knew. And during all his days — from the instant the knowledge had burst upon him until the present — he had fought the passion. He had fought it with his love for the woman of the photograph; with the memories of her gentleness, her goodness, and by centering his thoughts upon the things she had taught him.

For when he had grown old enough to understand —

after his father's death — she had warned him. She had seen in him the evidence of those violent, savage impulses which had made an outlaw of his father; and she had told him that once he drew a gun to slay a fellow-man he would be lost — for he had inherited his father's terrible blood-lust. *

There were men, she had said, who had slain without yielding to the passion to slay; but they were men in whom the will to withhold violence was stronger than the will to slay. He would not be of that type, she told him. And he knew she had spoken the truth.

He had known "killers" — men who had not been able to resist the impulse to slay once they had yielded to it. He had seen them cruel and venomous, taunting prospective victims, provoking them to some action that would give them an excuse to shoot.

He did not try to condone their actions — he despised the type. And yet he knew their passion for his own; and several times, when men had provoked him, and when he had been forced to draw his gun in self-protection, he had almost yielded to it.

But at those times he had kept his mother's face in mind, and thoughts of her had saved him. Twice since he had bought the Three Bar — once in Ocate and once just outside the town — he had clashed with men who had deliberately sought trouble with him. And both times, with

the yearning to slay them deep in his soul, he had withheld his hand, merely wounding the men.

But though he had not yet killed a man, he knew that in a section of the country where law and order had not been established, a man's ability with the six-shooter was his only hope of clinging to life. And in his clashes with the two men of Ocate, he had exhibited his uncanny cleverness with the weapon—and the inhabitants of the town had not failed to record the incidents in the storerooms of their brains.

Looking at the two pictures now he knew that his battle against the inherited vicious impulses was not yet won. Several times he had conquered them when he had been on the point of yielding; but he knew that one day, if the provocation came, he would yield. That was why, when the bitter mood came upon him—as it had today—he took his mother's picture from the wall and studied it, certain that he would get from it the encouragement he needed.

And at this instant he was in need of all the encouragement the study of his mother's picture could give him. He had never liked Amos Seddon; and now, with the knowledge that Seddon had lied about him, a bitter rage had seized him.

He knew why Seddon had lied about him. Seddon knew that he had always been straight; that the Three

Bar outfit—himself included—was composed of men not less honest than the men of other ranch outfits. But Seddon no doubt was possessed of a fear that his daughter would discover the secret of the boy—that she would learn of his guilt through him; and Seddon had deliberately poisoned the girl's mind against him.

That was the reason Rand had not revealed his identity to the girl sooner. He had been on the point of telling her when she had referred to him as an "outlaw." And because Rand knew that no one in the vicinity knew of his father's reputation—for if they had he would have heard of it in the four years he had been at the Three Bar—he had been certain the girl had meant that he, himself, was the outlaw to whom she referred.

He had permitted her to talk, for he had been eager to discover just what Seddon had said. And he had not been greatly surprised when the girl had told him that Link Compton's purpose in organizing the vigilance committee was to get evidence against him, for he was aware that Link Compton hated him as heartily.

That hatred had nothing tangible upon which to rest; but hatred was there. Rand had hated the man at first sight—when he had met him in Ocate soon after he had come to the Three Bar; and he had seen in Compton's eyes at that time the venomous, smoldering dislike that had endured until now.

And the times when Rand fought hardest against his savage impulse to slay was during those moments when some accident threw him in Link Compton's presence. He knew that if the time ever came when Compton provoked him to the point of drawing his gun, he would kill him and run the risk of yielding entirely to the passion that he was trying to crush.

He had heard enough from the girl to convince him that Seddon and Compton were plotting against him; but, strangely, as he sat in the chair looking at the two pictures his thoughts grew less vicious, and he found himself thinking of the girl.

He *had* been watching her while she was riding in the timber. He had heard from one of his men that she was back from school, and he had wanted to see her again. For on a day about four years before—just after he had bought the Three Bar—he had seen her boarding the stage at Ocate, to begin her journey to Denver, and the picture she made at that time had remained vivid in his memory.

And there had been times when he wondered if it had not been thoughts of her that influenced him to adopt Seddon's illegitimate boy and to keep secret the identity of the boy's father.

Certainly he had not kept silent on Seddon's account. Nor was he absolutely certain that thoughts of the daugh-

ter's mental distress—should she discover her father's guilt—had influenced him. He was afflicted with a growing conviction that he had yielded to a selfish impulse in adopting the boy; for in his heart, since the death of his mother, had reigned an acute hunger for something to love—something innocent and helpless—which would not be found among the women he had seen.

And when the dance-hall girl had sent for him—with rare accuracy selecting from among the many men of her acquaintance the one most likely to prove dependable in the crisis that had overtaken her—he had promptly and without question accepted the charge.

He had not even inquired the name of the boy's father—that information had been given him voluntarily, together with the injunction that he should not let Amos Seddon have the boy, even for an instant.

That had been something more than four years ago—just after Amos Seddon's wife had died; and Rand had known of Seddon's guilt before Eleanor Seddon had left the Bar S for Denver. And he had wondered then, as he wondered now, what she would say if she knew.

Then as Rand's thoughts went to the boy the savage passions that had held him for some time gradually subsided, and for a space he sat silent in the chair, the photographs forgotten, a huge grin on his face. A few minutes later he got up, went into the house, and hung the

pictures on the wall in their places; and then, still grinning, he strode into the kitchen, where the boy, in a clean blue gingham pinafore, was shooting wooden Indians with a toy pistol, and shouting "Pow!" each time he pulled the trigger of the imitation weapon.

Seated in a chair near a table was a kindly faced woman far past middle age. She was peeling potatoes and smiling benignly at the boy over the rims of her spectacles when Rand entered. In the kitchen, smoking a brier pipe, which he held between tight, withered lips as he talked to the boy, was a man who was slightly older than the woman.

Rand's smile included them all as he entered, but he went instantly to the boy and stretched out on the floor beside him.

"Knockin' 'em over, eh, Bud?" he said. "Well, darn 'em, if they're like some Apaches I used to know they deserve it!" And then, until the woman, whom he called "Aunt Betsey," announced that supper was ready, he helped the boy slaughter the red savages—though the slaughter was not characterized by the grimly bitter passions that had held him when on the porch he had been studying the two pictures.

CHAPTER IV

A WOMAN'S PERVERSENESS

AT ABOUT the time Rand and Eleanor Seddon were mounting their horses to ride to the Three Bar—after Rand had killed the wolf—Link Compton was riding across the Three Bar range in a southerly direction.

Compton knew that Eleanor Seddon had arrived in Ocate some days ago, and he was eager to see her—for he had been forced to listen much to Seddon's eulogies of her, and his interest had been awakened. But he did not wish to seem precipitate by visiting the Bar S so soon after the girl's arrival, so he had delayed.

As a matter of fact, Link Compton was not addicted to haste—in anything. He was big, massive, well proportioned; was in excellent physical condition; and the set of his head indicated that he had supreme confidence in himself.

He was handsome, though his features were rather heavy and sensuous. If Compton had affected to be fashionable in his attire—or if he had been scrupulously neat and particular—he would not have made so attractive a figure, for fine raiment would have accentuated the

impression of sensuality which one was only vaguely conscious of in his present garb.

That Compton seemed to know this was indicated by the fact that he habitually attired himself in a careless fashion, though he was careful to be certain—when in the presence of women, at least—that his soft felt sombrero was creased exactly right, that his flowing tie was arranged so that it imparted the impression of negligent unconcern; also, he saw to it that his boots were always well polished and his face cleanly shaven.

And yet Compton did not affect any mannerisms; he was always perfectly natural; and though his movements were deliberate, he somehow gave the impression that he could move quickly enough on occasion, and that tremendous force and virility lay masked beneath his outward deliberation.

That several reckless and unlawful citizens of Ocate and the surrounding country feared and respected him, suggested that there had been manifestations of the character that was hidden beneath his calm exterior.

Compton did not ride the river trail to cross Rand's land; he took the back trail—which intersected the Ocate trail at a point about two miles west of the Three Bar ranchhouse, and about the middle of the afternoon he was sitting on his horse before the front door of the Bar S, convinced that the house was deserted.

Frowning and disappointed, Compton got off his horse, walked across the porch, and knocked on the door. There was no response, and his frown deepening, Compton opened the door, entered the house, and went from one room to another, half expecting Seddon or his daughter had deliberately refused to answer the door.

When, after searching all the rooms, Compton became aware that his mean suspicions were unfounded, he went outside again, carefully closing the front door behind him, so that he left no evidence of his presence in the house.

Stepping down from the porch he went to the bunk-house; then to the stable and corral. And when at the corral fence he noted the absence of Silver, he grinned slightly, returned to the porch, and seated himself in a chair.

There, an hour later, riding rapidly along the river trail, Eleanor Seddon saw him.

The girl had almost recovered from the shock that had resulted from the knowledge that she had spent part of the afternoon riding with Beaudry Rand; but she had not forgiven Rand for deceiving her, for permitting her to think during the entire ride from the timber to the Three Bar that he was one of her father's men employed to watch her.

Nor had she forgiven him for permitting her to take

him into her confidence—in airing to him her father's opinions concerning him, and in repeating to him her father's grotesque description of his personal appearance. *That* had been outrageous!

There had been times during their ride to the Three Bar that she had looked upon Rand with an interest that had set her brain to weaving romances, with Rand and herself as the central figures—for he was a romantic figure! Or, he had been a romantic figure, rather; for now she was seething with a furious rage against him; and her mental anathemas during the ride home from the Three Bar had been directed at him definitely and vigorously.

And so, when she rode up to the front porch of the Bar S ranchhouse and sat motionless in the saddle, looking at the big man comfortably seated in a chair, and watching her with frank interest—and undoubted admiration—her face was flushed, her eyes bright. She made a picture that caused Compton's blood to leap and tingle, and his cheeks became stained with color which was the visible evidence of the desire that had laid hold of him.

He got up when Silver came to a halt, swept his soft, broad-brimmed hat from his head, and bowed gracefully to her.

"I am intruding, of course—and I ask your pardon. But I had a long ride—twenty miles—and I found no

one at home. So I took the liberty of putting a chair to work. I assure you that I have done no other damage. I am Compton, of the Two Link, down the river trail a piece."

She laughed, remembering—and returned his bow. "Mr. Compton! Oh, yes; Father spoke of you! Well, I'm sorry no one was here to welcome you. But Father is away with the outfit and the housekeeper has gone to town. I decided I wanted a look at the timber near the Three Bar. You see, it has been four years—and I used to love it!"

She swung around a little, preparing to dismount; but before she could get her feet clear of the stirrups Compton was at Silver's head, and he gallantly assisted her down. Then, before she could object, he was leading the horse toward the corral, saying lowly:

"I'll take care of Silver."

"Then you know him?" she called after him.

He looked back over his shoulder, smiling.

"Very well," he said; "I knew you would select him."

While Compton was busy with the horse, Eleanor went into the house, removed her riding-jacket and hat, and swiftly combed her wind-blown hair. By the time Compton finished with Silver, she was out on the porch again, fresh-looking; the flush still in her cheeks, her eyes still bright.

Compton did not offer to resume the chair he had been sitting in. Since he had seen the girl he had decided that Seddon's eulogies had been none too extravagant—indeed, he decided, Seddon could have made his praises more enthusiastic without overdoing it.

Therefore Compton—though his pulses were leaping with an eagerness that no other woman had ever aroused in him—did not betray his eagerness.

Outwardly he was never more deliberate in his life. Given the same opportunity—the girl alone, and they her father's friends—some men of the Compton type, ruthless, virile, with passions that the broad license of unscrupulous power and little law imparted, would have committed the error of revealing too clearly the desire that had seized them.

Compton, however, made no such mistake. Standing at the porch edge he gave the girl just that measure of admiration which would indicate that she had impressed him. The bold smile with which he greeted other women in the past—the smile whose significance had brought blushes to many fair faces—was now absent; and in the man's eyes as he looked at the girl was the nearest imitation of frank, manly interest he could summon.

"I won't stop long," he said; "I just rode over to welcome you home. For, you see," he added as he saw her eyes light with pleasure, "your father has been talk-

ing about you, and all of us denizens of the sagebrush have been anxious to see you. I have known for several days that you were home." He smiled broadly. "Don't you think I did rather well—to stay away this long?"

"Marvelously well!" she mocked, catching the spirit of banter with which he had clothed his words.

Compton talked about Denver; he learned much of her school experience; but he learned much more of her character as their talk ran from one indifferent subject to another. He discovered that she was spirited and independent; that no man had yet intrigued her interest; and by the time they had exhausted the indifferent subjects there was not the least atmosphere of constraint between them.

"Are you *sure* you are Mr. Compton, of the Two Link?" she asked, her eyes twinkling as she looked down at him. "For," she added, without giving him a chance to reply, "I made one mistake today, and I don't want to make another. You see," she explained, "Father warned me about going into the timber. But I love the timber, and I just couldn't help going. And when I got into the timber, I got off Silver to pick some flowers, forgetting that a range horse would not stand with the reins tied to the saddle-horn."

She told him about the wolf, and about her rescuer. And when she related what had happened at the Three

Bar, when Rand had shown her the photograph of his father, she saw Compton's lips straighten.

"He admitted his father was an outlaw, eh?" said Compton, after she had finished.

She nodded, adding: "And he certainly *looked* like an outlaw!"

"And Beau Rand, himself?" questioned Compton.

She looked with covert sharpness at the Two Link owner, noting the cold levelness of his gaze, and the slight pout that had come to his lips.

"You want to know what I think of him?" she asked, a gleam of mischief in her eyes — for she saw that Compton's cheeks were stained darkly, and that his eyes were alight with an expression that seemed almost malignant — reminding her of the expression of her father's face on the day he had told her to beware of Rand.

It was jealousy that had seized Compton — she knew it! And with all a woman's perverseness, she said:

"Why, Father drew a terrible description of Rand! I believe that was why I did not recognize Rand when I saw him after he had killed the wolf. You see, I was expecting him to have pink hair and a number of other things not commonly worn by humans. And I discovered him to be a rather handsome and manly fellow after all. And he is quite interesting — and remarkably modest. I — rather liked him!"

Compton said nothing, for he felt that the violent passions that raged within him would have betrayed him to Miss Seddon—would have betrayed the jealousy that had seized him.

"I think," said Eleanor, wondering at Compton's continued silence, "that perhaps Rand is misunderstood."

"You say you told him what your father said about him—that he was suspected of being responsible for the stealing that has been going on around here? And you also told him I suspected him and was trying to get evidence against him?"

"And he didn't seem a bit worried about it!" declared the girl.

"He was riding a Bar S horse?" said Compton. "Are you sure of that?"

The girl nodded, and Compton smiled faintly.

"Well," he said significantly, "I am glad your adventure didn't turn out to be any worse than it did. And," he added, looking at her with a straight, penetrating gaze, "I am glad you found Rand interesting. But may I hope that you won't play favorites—at least until you find out more about us—all of us. And don't be stingy about your rides. I occasionally have time, and if you really want somebody to go with you, why I——"

"Twenty miles!" she interrupted, laughter in her voice; "why, when I got here a little while ago you com-

plained that you had ridden very far — twenty miles — and you were sitting in a chair — almost ready to collapse! Don't you think a twenty-mile ride, just to accompany me, would be a little more than you could stand?"

His eyes gleamed; some of the boldness that he had hitherto concealed shone in them.

"If a man likes a woman—" he began.

"I don't like sentimental men," she interrupted, her eyes chilling.

He laughed, and bowed to her. "And I like a spirited woman," he said. His eyes grew quizzical. "I'll ride that twenty miles—any time—if it kills me!" he vowed with pretended recklessness. "Tomorrow?" he inquired.

"No!" she said sharply, unsmilingly.

"The day after?" he persisted.

"Not then—never, perhaps."

"Well," he laughed, "I shall be riding over to see your father. And perhaps—some day—you will go riding with me. I shall hope, at least."

He got on his horse and rode away, while Eleanor stood on the porch watching him, conscious that he had impressed her as deeply as Rand had impressed her. And yet there was a difference.

Compton was big and bold and magnetic. And while she liked him, she realized that his appeal was physical.

On the other hand, while she was convinced that she hated Rand, she was conscious of the manhood of him—a thing not to be measured by appearances—the atmosphere of stern and uncompromising earnestness which, contrasted to Compton's light boldness, made him seem to be the better man. And yet, when from a distance Compton turned in the saddle and waved a hand at **her**, she answered him in a like manner, blushing.

CHAPTER V

THE CONSPIRATORS

COMPTON'S back had hardly been turned upon Eleanor Seddon when he scowled and drew a deep breath of rage and disappointment. For he had divined from the girl's manner that he was not to make the easy conquest he had anticipated. Worse, she had met Beaudry Rand, and liked him. Therefore, nursing his bitter hatred for Rand, and adding to it the jealousy that had been aroused over the meeting between the two, Compton's passions were murderous as he rode away.

He had not asked Eleanor where her father had gone; he knew the Bar S outfit was working the southerly section of the range—where there was still a little water; and he headed southward, riding steadily.

Dusk overtook him before he came within sight of the Bar S outfit wagon; and night had fallen when he rode up to the camp fire, around which the men of the outfit were congregated.

Compton had ridden another twenty miles to reach the Bar S outfit, and he was in no good humor. He listened impatiently to Seddon's plaint of things gone wrong—of cattle in some near-by timber; of the inclination of neigh-

boring cattlemen to "hog it" in the matter of unbranded calves; of the growing difficulty of conducting a round-up, due to the ever-increasing number of ranchers in the vicinity.

But at last Compton drew Seddon aside. Standing near the chuck wagon, the light from the camp fire in their faces, Compton grinned maliciously at Seddon.

"I'm glad to see you have overcome your ridiculous prejudice against Beau Rand," said Compton.

Seddon stiffened. "Meanin' what?"

"Meaning that Rand went riding with your daughter today in the timber, near the Three Bar. Rand rescued her from a wolf that attacked her, took her to the Three Bar, and got sufficiently intimate with her to show her the pictures in the family album."

Seddon's face worked with a rage that made him breathless.

"I knowed the damn skunk would manage it!" he cursed, after a time, while Compton watched him with a grin of bitter interest. "Now, what in hell was she doin' in the timber — when I told her to stay away from it!"

Compton laughed. "If I've sized her up right, she'll be doing what she pleases," he said; "she's got a mind of her own. I had quite a little talk with her, Seddon. She'd look well seated opposite me at the dining-room table at the Two Links. I mean to have her — you agreeing."

Some of the passion went out of Seddon's face, leaving it pale. And his eyes gleamed truculently as he leaned forward to peer into Compton's face.

"Just what do you mean by that?" he demanded.

Compton laughed lowly. "I mean to run straight with her," he said.

Seddon drew a deep breath. "You've got to, Compton—or you don't run at all!" He now laughed, mockingly. "How do you know she'd have you? She ain't the kind of a girl that a man can win against her will!"

"She's a thoroughbred!" declared Compton. And now his eyes gleamed balefully in the semidarkness. "But she's met Rand, and he's a handsome devil," he added, watching Seddon's face closely. He saw Seddon's fingers go around the rim of the wagon wheel nearest him, gripping the wheel with all his strength, while he stood, rigid and straining, yielding to the terrible passion that had seized him.

Compton laughed lowly and vibrantly. "You don't like that prospect, eh? Well, why don't you get Rand out of the way?"

Seddon relaxed; Compton saw him tremble; noted the pallid face and the shifting eyes.

Compton grinned understandingly.

"Scared of him, eh?" he said.

"Who in hell ain't scared of him?" demanded Seddon.

"There ain't a man in the damned country that will face him when he's wearin' a gun—an' that's all the time! Scared of him? Hell's fire! All Ocate's scared of him! Ain't I seen them? Standin' around when he's in town—every man of them yearnin' to salivate him, an' not a damned one of them got nerve enough to look him straight in the eye! Scared of him!"

Compton laughed smoothly. "I admit he's got the boys bluffed. But did he ever down a man? Think! You remember the time he had a run-in with Kel Latan—that gunman I brought over from Yuma? And that other guy—Blacky Pelton—that you got from Dry Bottom, to wipe him out? Well, what did he do to them? Pinked them—that's all! Put both of Latan's arms out of business, and busted Pelton's shoulder so that Pelton could never lift an arm again.

"But he didn't kill them; he was mighty careful of that! It puzzled me quite a bit, I admit; and I never could understand Rand. But I've got him right, now, Seddon! Today he showed your daughter a photograph of his father. His father was Beaudry Rand, the outlaw. I've heard of him—he was from the Durango country. Like a damned fool, I never associated the names—or I should have recalled the history of Rand's father. He was a killer, Seddon—a he-devil with a gun; quick as lightning on the draw! And he shot to kill every time!

"Understand, now? Young Rand is afraid of himself; he's afraid to kill a man for fear he'll be just like his father. He's inherited his father's blood-lust, and he knows that once he lets go he'll turn into a killer! He has proved that, hasn't he? He knew Latan and Pelton were out to get him, and he lets them off, just wounding them."

Seddon shook his head. "I ain't takin' any chances with the cuss," he said. "Mebbe he's afraid to shoot to kill, an' mebbe he ain't. But if that's why he ain't done any killin', mebbe there'll come a time when he *will* let loose. An' I ain't yearnin' to be in front of his guns when he *does* let go all holds!"

Compton grinned evilly. "He's ridin' a black horse, branded with the Bar S. Where did he get it?"

"Bought it from Mellert—my range boss. That black—Midnight—was an outlaw, an' I told Mellert to get rid of him. So he sold him to Rand, an' Rand broke him, makin' the best horse in the country out of him—damn him!"

"Did Mellert give him a bill of sale?"

"No!" snapped Seddon; "what you gettin' at?"

"Getting at Rand," said Compton shortly. "You back my play and we'll frame him. I'll fix it with the sheriff tonight."

Shortly before midnight, Compton rode into Ocate and

dismounted at a hitching rail in front of a big frame building, still agleam with lights, across whose front was a huge sign:

THE GILT EDGE SALOON AND DANCE-HALL

Entering, Compton stood for an instant blinking at the lights and grinning at the crowd that thronged the barroom and the dance-hall in the rear. And when, his eyes becoming accustomed to the glare, he saw a big man seated at a table at the rear of the barroom, he strode to the table, seated himself in a chair opposite the big man, and smiled at him.

"For a sheriff, you're reasonably liberal-minded, Webster," he said. "If you'd move your office down here——"

The big man grinned. "Law an' order," he said; "I've got to be on the job, here!"

"Speaking of jobs," said Compton, leaning close to the other and lowering his voice, "we've got the goods on Beau Rand!"

"The hell you have!" said the sheriff. He was surprised, and he tried to get some enthusiasm into his voice. But the color left his face, and his eyes drooped to a glass on the table in front of him. He fingered it nervously as he listened to Compton, who continued to talk.

Later the sheriff got up and went out, returning after

a few minutes with a tall, slender, cruel-faced man, whom he introduced as "Slim" Kinney. The man wore two guns, both swung low at his hips. There was a hard, cynical light in his eyes as he looked at Compton while Webster introduced him.

"Slim's been achin' to join us for quite a spell," said Webster. "Down Bernalillo way—where Slim's been hangin out—things has been gettin' pretty hot for him; them havin' no sheriff whose views is as broad as mine—an' Slim needin' lots of broadness in his business. He's allowin' he'd admire to be one of my deputies—an' he'd admire to have the job of salivatin' Beau Rand. I reckon we ain't objectin'." The sheriff's eyes glittered.

Kinney dropped into a chair, and Compton ordered drinks. And while the three men sat there over the bottles and glasses they talked long and earnestly; their voices rising toward the end as the liquor in the bottle slowly vanished.

It was after midnight when they got up, the sheriff staggering a little; Kinney's face flushed, and his legs unsteady. Compton, however, seemed unaffected by the whisky; and when they went out through the front door, Compton walked as straight as he had walked when he had entered.

All of which led an observer to remark, admiringly, to a friend:

"Link Compton don't let nothin' feaze him!"

But Compton might have worried a little had he known what happened in the Gilt Edge immediately after he went out with Webster and Kinney. For a tall, gracefully built girl, with dark hair and black, lambent eyes, which were flashing with passion, had watched Compton and the others leave the room. During all the time that Compton and the others had sat at their table, talking, the girl had been sitting in a chair in the dance-hall, pretending to watch the dancers, but in reality listening to the conversation carried on between the three men.

At first she had been merely tired, and had leaned her head against the thin board partition that separated the barroom from the dance-hall. But when she heard Compton's voice, and Webster's—and later Kinney's—she had pressed an ear hard against the partition, and despite the noise, she had heard much—especially during the lulls in the dancing.

She got up now, slipping along the partition until she reached the slender stairway that led upward to her room above the dance-hall. There, at the foot of the stairs, a man halted her.

"Leavin' us now, Lucia?" he demanded, reaching out an unsteady hand.

She looked at him with steady eyes, her dark face set

and hard. The man withdrew his hand and stepped back.

"In a tantrum again, eh?" he laughed. "Well, I ain't rilin' you none!"

She got up the stairs without further molestation, and in her room she swiftly changed her clothing; emerging later, attired in riding garments that fitted her snugly and becomingly.

She paused in the upper hall, listening; then she went swiftly to the far end of the passage and ran down an outside stairway. Down in the somber shadows of the building she paused again, to peer around the corner nearest her. Then, seeing no one, she ran to a stable in the rear of the building, entered, emerging later leading a pony.

Mounting the animal, she headed it across the moonlit plain that began at the edge of town, and rode rapidly over a narrow trail that, she knew, would take her straight to the Three Bar.

The distance was about five miles, but the little animal under her made short work of it, and within half an hour from the time she had mounted she was standing at the front door of the Three Bar ranchhouse pounding on one of the panels.

Shortly the door opened and Rand stood on the threshold looking at her; partly dressed, his feet bare, a heavy pistol in his right hand.

"Lucia Morell!" he exclaimed when he saw her. And then he was out on the porch, gripping one of her arms, and peering closely at her, for he saw the excitement in her eyes.

"What's up?" he demanded.

"Plenty, Rand," she said, her breath coming fast. "Link Compton is planning to kill you! Tonight I heard them talking about you. It's about that black horse of yours—Midnight! They say you stole him! Amos Seddon has charged you with it. And tonight Link Compton came to town and told Webster. They're not going to arrest you—they're going to shoot you! They've hired a gunfighter named Slim Kinney. They've deputized him, and they're going to wait until you come to town. Then they'll kill you, and say you resisted arrest!"

CHAPTER VI

THE WATCHER

RAND laughed lowly, and grasping the girl by the shoulders, turned her around so that the moonlight shone on her face.

He had seen the girl several times at the Gilt Edge—on those nights when the monotony of life had afflicted him and he had gone to town to relieve it. Several times he had danced with her, and there had been other times when he had sat at one of the tables with her, talking. And he had found her interesting, despite the life she led.

That, however, had been the limit of his acquaintance with her—for he had no liking for her kind. He had not failed to note, though, that she was interested in him, and for that reason he had made his visits to the Gilt Edge as infrequent as possible.

He was aware of his obligation; and there was no doubt that had she not warned him he might have gone, unknowing, to his death at the hands of the gunfighter.

Releasing her shoulders, he took one of her hands, gripping it tightly.

“You are a bang-up girl, Lucia, an’ I thank you for warnin’ me. I ain’t claimin’ to know why you came

here — I reckon I don't quite get the drift. I thought you an' Link Compton was pretty thick, an'——"

"Bah!" she sneered, her teeth flashing; "Compton is a—a beast!"

"You've had a fallin' out, eh?" he said; "an' you're doin' this to get even with him."

"No!" she said violently; "that isn't so! Rand——" she added, trying to get closer to him. Her eyes were glowing with a light that he could not mistake, and his lips straightened as he seized her by the shoulders and held her off.

She looked downward for an instant, plainly disappointed; and then up again, her eyes searching his.

"You like another girl?" she asked slowly.

He shook his head; but at the instant he thought of Eleanor Seddon. She saw the glow in his eyes and her own flashed.

"Yes," she said; "you like another girl. Who is she?"

He laughed lightly, though his face grew flushed.

"Shucks!" he said, "you women have sure got keen eyes. But you're hittin' the wrong trail now, Lucia—there ain't no girl that would take a shine to me. Anyway," he went on sharply as she essayed to interrupt, "there ain't no time to do any love gassin' tonight! You hop right on your cayuse an' get back to the Gilt Edge before anybody gets wise that you left."

"Well," she said, looking defiantly up at him, her lips pursed; "you might kiss me—once—for visiting you at this time of the night."

He bent toward her, grinning, and lightly brushed her cheek. He would have stepped back, then, but she slipped suddenly sidewise, threw her arms around his neck and kissed him fervently half a dozen times on the lips—holding him tightly to her, her lithe form writhing in the effort to draw his head down so that she might hold it captive.

He freed himself, and stepped back, holding her off at arm's length to look at her. Her eyes were aflame, and she laughingly backed away from him, saying:

"There, now! Do you think another girl could love you like that?"

"Shucks!" he said, grinning; "I didn't think you was goin' to herd-ride me!"

Her laugh came back to him as he stood on the porch watching her as she rode toward town; and he stood there for some minutes after she had vanished, thinking of her.

"I reckon she's holdin' somethin' against Compton that ain't forgivable—to make her act like that to me," he reflected. "Women like that has a mighty hard time of it—gettin' a man to love them like they want to be loved. I reckon no *man* is doin' it!"

Entering the house, his face setting into hard, grim

lines as he crossed the threshold, he went to his room, pulled on his boots, and got into the garments that he had neglected to put on when aroused by Lucia Morell, moving stealthily, lest he awaken Bud and Aunt Betsey and Uncle Ephraim.

Fully dressed, he buckled on his cartridge belt, swinging a pistol at each hip — low down; and carefully tying the bottoms of the holsters to the legs of his leather *chapa-rajós* — a precaution of the careful gunman against the accidental snagging of the weapon when rapid drawing is necessary.

Noiselessly crossing the floor, he went out, carefully closing the door behind him. Then he went to the horse corral, roped Midnight, threw saddle and bridle on him, leaped into the saddle, and rode down the river trail.

With the first streak of dawn Amos Seddon was riding his horse along the corral fence, making for the gate, where he intended to turn in the animal.

Seddon had not been able to sleep after Link Compton had left him; he had sat glumly near the fire, thinking of Eleanor and her meeting with Rand.

And when the other men had wrapped themselves in their blankets, stretching out, their feet toward the fire, Seddon had sat there still, a sullen gleam in his eyes, his thoughts centering heavily upon Rand and his daughter.

At last, about one o'clock in the morning, he had not been able to endure the mental misery any longer. He had aroused the cook, telling him to inform the men that he had gone back to the ranchhouse; then he had caught up his horse, mounted him, and set out for home.

For the first time since Eleanor had been home he felt a glow of rage toward the girl. She had disobeyed him; she had deliberately thrown herself into Rand's company. For he had not failed to note her interest in the man when he had been telling her about him, and he meant to take her to task for her disobedience.

But his rage against his daughter detracted nothing from the fury he felt over the thought that perhaps Rand might have met her purposely, by design. Rand was none too good to do a thing like that, he told himself; Rand was a miserable, sneaking coyote, or he would not have stepped in when he had to take the boy away from him.

It is one of the grotesque truths that a thing is never so valuable as when it is unattainable—and at this moment Seddon felt that he wanted the boy more than ever before—even though he had not had courage enough to take him when he had had an opportunity. It was not until Rand had taken the boy that Seddon had realized he wanted the youngster himself.

Dismounting at the corral gate, his thoughts were viciously centered upon Rand. He drew mental pictures

of Rand talking with his daughter; he could even see Rand's crooked smile as he watched the girl's face, while he meditated over the secret he possessed. He even debated the impulse that, he felt, must have been in Rand's mind when he had been in the girl's presence: "Should he tell her?"

Rand *would* tell her, of course, for Rand was that kind; he would tell her just to be mean — just to bring confusion upon *him*. He'd have to kill Rand now; he wouldn't even wait until Compton could frame up on Rand; he would see Eleanor first, to tell her he knew she had been talking to Rand, and then he would ride over to the Three Bar to kill Rand.

So terrible was his rage that when he passed the stable door he had to stop there and stand for a time, lest he lose his self-control entirely. He waited, calming himself a little, for he did not want Eleanor to see him in his present temper.

And while he stood there a tremor of fear ran over him. He thought it was a reaction from his rage. But it was not. He knew that presently, when his thoughts went again to Rand. He knew he would not ride over to the Three Bar to kill Rand, for even now, standing there, the fear he felt for Rand increased.

It whitened his face, it made his breath labor and lag in his throat, so that he reached up and clawed at the collar

of his shirt in an effort to lessen the constriction that seemed to be there.

Then he shuddered, seized with one of those inexplicable and compelling presentiments which seem to warn one of an evil presence. He yielded to it, wheeling swiftly, his right hand on the butt of his pistol—to see Rand standing at a corner of the stable watching him.

CHAPTER VII

WAITING

SEDDON did not know how long Rand had been there — many minutes, he supposed, judging from Rand's attitude. For Rand was standing with legs asprawl, his arms folded, the fingers of his right hand gently caressing his chin. There was a curious half-smile on Rand's face — it was as though an evil passion in Rand's heart was engaged in a mighty battle with the grim humor that seemed to dominate him.

And Seddon found himself hoping that the humor would continue to dominate; for he had never seen Rand in that mood. For in Rand's attitude, in the smile, in the atmosphere around him, in some intangible something that seemed to linger about him, was a slumbering threat of destroying violence.

Seddon did not draw the pistol that reposed so near his limp fingers; he knew he could not do it. A gleam in Rand's eyes told him that Rand was waiting for just such a movement; and though he knew that Rand's hands would have to travel farther than his own to reach the pistols at his hips, he dared not take the chance.

And, so great was the tension that held him, he started and flung his hands upward when Rand spoke:

"Thinkin' mean thoughts about me, wasn't you, Seddon? Oh, don't!"

His voice was a curious, slow drawl—vibrating a little, as though the man were having trouble in restraining the intense passion that had gripped him. But his grin was growing broader, and a sensation of vast relief stole over Seddon. And yet there was a threatening quality in the grin, too. Seddon stood rigid as Rand spoke again:

"Conscience, eh?" he said. "I was wonderin' if you *had* any. It's the first time you've showed it." He grinned crookedly. "I reckon you're fussed up about that outlaw horse Mellert sold me—Midnight. Recollect him, eh? Well, when I bought Midnight from Mellert I clean forgot to get a bill of sale for him. I'm takin' it now!"

Seddon gulped and cleared his throat before he could speak. He feared Rand, but he also feared Link Compton's wrath.

"Mellert sold him to you," he said; "it's up to Mellert to fix up a receipt for the money you paid him."

Rand's eyes narrowed to glittering pin points; he grinned felinely and lowered his hands, so that the fingers brushed the butts of his pistols. And his voice came sharply, viciously:

"I'm wantin' that bill of sale right now. You an' me are goin' to conclude a business deal accordin' to fair an' square rules. You're precedin' me to your office, where you're intendin' to scribble some on a billhead. You're goin' to show a heap of speed. An' if you do any yappin' in the office, to get your daughter in there *before* you do your scribblin', the mourners will be on the job, pronto. Mosey along, you polecat!"

For an instant Seddon hesitated. Then he turned, and without a word began to walk toward the ranchhouse, Rand close behind him.

Convinced of the utter futility of resistance, Seddon did not hesitate when he reached the office—which was entered through a door that opened from the front porch. Inside, he sat at a little, flat-topped desk and wrote:

Received from Beaudry Rand one hundred and twenty-five dollars as payment in full for a black outlaw horse, named Midnight.

Rand was standing over him as he wrote, directing him.

"Now date it," ordered Rand. "Make it the 25th of March. That's the day I paid Mellert the money. An' now," he added as he folded the paper and stuck it in a pocket, "I reckon that squares us—on that deal."

He looked at Seddon with a mirthless smile, which had

in it a quality of irony that made Seddon look at him in wonder. And while Seddon watched him he drew a chair near the desk, dropped into it, and leaned back, as though he intended to remain there indefinitely.

Seddon continued to look at him, amazed at this strange proceeding; for it seemed to Seddon that were he in Rand's place he would have departed—for obviously, he had received what he had come for.

But it seemed that Rand had no intention of going. At least not for a while; for he leaned back lazily, pretending to look out of one of the windows—though Seddon knew the gleaming eyes were watching him covertly, to forestall any attempt he might make to recover the paper.

For a quarter of an hour Seddon sat, almost consumed with curiosity, watching Rand. Still Rand did not move, nor did he speak. The silence grew unbearable to Seddon; for he knew that back of Rand's continuing presence in the office was a reason—he would not sit there, with his pretense and his silence, unless he meditated some other surprising action.

Seddon grew restless and impatient and wrathful. But Rand continued to sit there, silent and motionless.

And at last Seddon could stand the suspense no longer.

"Why in hell don't you get out of here?" he blurted. "You've got what you come for!"

Rand turned then, looking at Seddon, his eyes glinting

with a mocking light that made Seddon yearn to draw his gun. And yet he knew he dared not draw the weapon; for though there was mockery in Rand's eyes, there was also a malicious devil in them, carrying a warning to Seddon.

"You been readin' my mind while you've been settin' there, Seddon?" he inquired gently. "Well, I've been wonderin' if you was. For I've been thinkin' a heap — an' none of my thoughts was complimentin' you any." He grinned, and Seddon cringed into his chair. "If you didn't quite ketch *everything* I was thinkin' about, I'll help you out a little. It sure was interestin' — to me.

"First, I was just settin' here, waitin' for it to get time for your daughter to get up — I ain't eager to spoil her sleep none."

"What you wantin' my daughter for?" demanded Seddon, a great fear gripping him — a fear that Rand wanted Eleanor for the purpose of telling her about the boy — his boy.

"Well," grinned Rand, "my thoughts *was* a lot jumbled — that's a fact! So you didn't read them right? They was like a herd of cattle millin' around, gettin' ready to stampede. There didn't seem to be no sense or logic to them. But one thing was stickin' out plain in them — an' I couldn't lose it. It was this: You lied about me to your daughter!

“That’s a heap disconcertin’, ain’t it?” he added as Seddon started and gripped the arms of his chair. “It was disconcertin’ to me, too — when she begun tellin’ me what you said. You made it strong, didn’t you? You told her I was an outlaw — that I run my brand on other folks’ cattle an’ horses; an’ that I robbed the stage; an’ so forth, an’ so on, with all the variations. An’ all the time you knowed you was a damned liar, an’ that you was poisonin’ her mind against me. What for? That’s what I’m intendin’ to find out!”

He looked keenly at Seddon during the silence that followed his words. And he saw Seddon writhe and squirm in his chair and glare murder at him.

“I reckon it was because you was scared I’d go to gassin’ to her about the boy,” he went on when Seddon did not answer. “Well, you needn’t worry about *that* — I wouldn’t want any girl to know that her dad had been such a skunk!

“I had other thoughts, too — an’ some of them was some prominent. One of the big ones — that kept stickin’ its head up, was that you ought to tell her you’d made a mistake about me — that you’d sized me up wrong. I ain’t carin’ how you do it. But we’ve got lots of time, an’ you can get your thinkin’ cap on while we’re waitin’ for your daughter to get up. She’ll be up in an hour or so, I reckon. It’s five o’clock now.

"An' while you're thinkin' of that, you can think of somethin' else, too," he went on, grinning coldly. "You can consider how nice an' comfortable you've got it here—in the ranchhouse—an' how it's too nice an' homey here for a man to be runnin' around the country—especially today. You can decide that you won't do any ridin' today—that you won't join the outfit, an' that if any man of the outfit comes you won't be able to see him—you'll be sick or somethin'. You'll find the excuse.

"An' you won't go to Ocate today, nor send no messenger—for fear Link Compton an' the sheriff an' that gunfighter they've got in town waitin' for me, will know that I've got a bill of sale for Midnight. You won't do anything that will let them know, for if you do I'll ram both my guns into your waistband and blow you so far into hell that the devil an' his imps would spend a thousand years lookin' for you!"

He leaned forward in his chair, his eyes gleaming with a cold ferocity that made Seddon shiver.

"You understand me?" demanded Rand when Seddon did not speak.

Seddon nodded.

"Then we'll do our waitin'."

Rand settled back into his seat again, while Seddon, his face crimson with a futile rage, gripped the arms of his chair and watched him.

A clock in the office ticking monotonously, made the only sound in the tense, brooding silence of the room. A half-hour dragged by — three-quarters. And then Seddon fidgeted and glared venomously at Rand, silent, imperturbable, his face expressionless.

Seddon writhed and squirmed in his chair. The inexorable will of the other man was compelling him to do a thing his soul revolted from. But he knew he would do it — for there was no other way. He had seen the implacable determination in Rand's eyes; he saw it even now in Rand's apparently unconcerned attitude. For Rand's attitude advertised that he knew Seddon would do as he said — that he had no doubt of it.

Seddon had always feared Rand — feared him as much as he hated him. And he knew that Rand could shoot to kill if he wanted to; that he had exercised forbearance in the clashes he had had with the two gunmen who had been deliberately seeking his life. Ocate knew it — everybody knew; and since that time no man of Ocate had trifled with him.

For Rand was a puzzle to them all. They whispered to one another that Rand had never killed a man; that he lacked the nerve to kill; there were some of them who even jeeringly remarked — always when Rand was not present — that he was “yellow” — a term descriptive of a cowardice too contemptible to merit attention.

And yet no man of Ocate—or of the surrounding country—ever had attempted personally to prove the charge; and all men treated him with frigid respect and deference—which indicated their brains had formed opinions which they dared not express in Rand's presence.

It was that way with them all—with all of Rand's enemies. They were puzzled, mystified—baffled by the lingering threat in his manner; by the uncertainty of him; they were awed by the dread thought that though he had—to their knowledge—never killed a man, he might at any time decide to do so. And no man of them cared to be the first.

Nor did Seddon care to be the first; it was an experiment from which he shrank in fear and trembling.

CHAPTER VIII

A SHATTERED PIPE

SITTING there in the chair now, Seddon knew he hated Rand more than he ever had hated him; and yet he was convinced that when Rand gave him the order to tell Eleanor that he had been mistaken in his estimation of Rand's character—that he had unknowingly lied about him—he would do it. And when, just before the hands of the clock pointed to six, Seddon heard a sound in the house, indicating that Eleanor had awakened and was moving about, he looked at Rand, to see the other watching him with cold level gaze.

"You'll call her now," said Rand.

Seddon got up slowly and walked to the inside door.

"Damn you!" he declared venomously. "I'll get even with you some day for this!"

Rand's grin was saturnine. "I'll know if you go to back-bitin' me to her," he said evenly. "You tellin' her now that you was wrong when you told her I was the mean man you said I was will make her treat me like a white man. An' if she gets treatin' me like an outlaw again I'll come for you. Then you'll have your chance to get even! Start yappin'!"

Standing in the open doorway, Seddon called gruffly:

"If you've finished dressin', Ellie, come into the office —I've got a visitor!"

"There's tones of voice," came Rand's voice behind him warningly; "there's a vinegar voice an' a voice of honey. If you go to speakin' sour to her, she'll get wise —an' you'll croak, wonderin' why you didn't have more sense!"

Rand's voice had hardly died away when there was a rustle at the door, and Eleanor Seddon stood in the opening.

She caught her breath with a quick gasp when she saw Rand—who was now on his feet, bowing to her, his face expressionless, his eyes twinkling with some mysterious emotion—and then she stiffened, lifted her chin defiantly and spoke to her father, ignoring Rand.

"Is *this* your visitor?" she coldly inquired. "Beaudry Rand, the outlaw?"

And now she gazed at Rand with cold, steady hostility, which he met with a gravely gentle smile.

"I reckon things have been a bit mixed up, ma'am," he said. "I ain't much on the talk, an' so your father will do the explainin'." And he looked at Seddon.

Seddon fidgeted nervously. "Ellie," he said, "when I was talkin' to you the other day—about Rand, here—I made a mistake, I reckon. I told you he was the man

who was stealin' stock right an' left, an' holdin' up the stage. I reckon I went too far. I was talkin' extravagant; the reason bein' that I'd missed a black outlaw horse, which we called Midnight—an' I'd seen Rand ridin' him. But since then I've found out that Rand didn't steal the horse—he bought him from Mellert—my range boss—an' everything is all regular an' straight. It was just a misunderstandin'. Rand ain't no outlaw."

The girl's face crimsoned; she looked from her father to Rand—who did not smile, though he felt much like smiling—and then back to her father, who reddened again and could not meet her gaze.

"Why, Daddy!" she said then. "How unjust of you! You judged Mr. Rand before you knew! Was that the evidence you meant Mr. Compton was getting—evidence that Mr. Rand stole Midnight?"

"I reckon," muttered Seddon.

"And you had no other evidence against him—no evidence whatever, in fact?" she demanded.

The girl looked intently at him, assuming that his obvious distress was caused by remorse over his mistake; and then she walked straight to Rand and extended a hand to him, saying earnestly:

"I am sorry, Mr. Rand. But, you see——"

He interrupted her, for he saw the embarrassment shining in her eyes:

"Shucks! it ain't anything. I reckon you had cause to be mighty suspicious. When I think of how stiff an' mysterious I was when I took you into the house an' showed you the picture of my dad, I'm some surprised that I wasn't suspicious of myself.

"You see, what you'd said about me bein' an outlaw had kind of got under my skin, an' I was feelin' a bit flustered—an' mean. An' you had cause to run away—like you did." He looked at her, mirth in his eyes.

"I didn't run—so very fast!" she denied, meeting his eyes and wondering how, yesterday, she had decided they were like the eyes of the man of the photograph. For they were not like his father's; there was nothing cruel in them. On the contrary, they were wise, subtle, humorous eyes; the hard steel-gray of them softened by a luminous glow that hinted of gentleness.

But there was something more in them, too, she knew—a something that baffled her—a glint of recklessness mingled with the gentleness she knew was there—a slumbering something that convinced her he was an enigma not to be solved at a glance—or perhaps not to be solved at all.

"Well," he said, "mebbe your horse wasn't runnin'; but from where I stood it seemed to me he was doin' somethin' that looked mighty like runnin'."

"So you watched me?" she said.

"Why sure, ma'am," he grinned.

"You had been watching me in the timber, too!" she said, remembering that he had told her that; and remembering, too, that since it had turned out that he was not employed by her father he could have no excuse for spying upon her in the timber. She had not forgiven him for that!

"I reckon I've got to do some explainin' about that," he told her gravely. "I saw you comin' toward the timber. I was mendin' a saddle-cinch on Midnight, an' I saw you headin' for the timber. I didn't know then that you was Eleanor Seddon—though mebbe I had a mighty strong suspicion—you comin' from this direction, an' me havin' got a glimpse of you the day you left Ocate to go to school at Denver."

"That timber is alive with wolves, ma'am; an' you was alone. So I jumped on Midnight an' moseyed around, keepin' you in sight. But mostly, I was keepin' in sight that wolf I salivated. He'd picked up your trail mighty soon after you got into the timber, an' I wasn't allowin' I wanted him to get that kind of a dinner."

"He *did* look hungry," she said, shuddering.

He laughed lowly, and stepped toward the door, for now that Seddon had set him right with the girl he felt he had no right to linger longer—much as he wished he might.

For the girl had made a deep impression upon him. The lure of her had seized him; he felt its strength; he was aware of the gripping desire that had fastened upon him. His experience with women had been elemental—he had seen few good ones and had avoided the bad ones. However, his lack of experience with them had not prevented him visioning an ideal; and he knew the ideal was in the flesh before him.

As a matter of fact, it had been upon the glimpse of the girl, four years before, that he had fashioned his picture of the ideal that was to rule him, and during the elapsed interval she had achieved that perfection of which he dreamed.

Yet he strongly suspected she was not for him. For Fate, in the shape of the boy—Seddon's boy—had erected a barrier he could not destroy. It had aroused Seddon's malignant enmity, it had made thoughts of an agreement between him and Seddon impossible. And he also strongly suspected that the girl would be influenced by her father's attitude toward him, even if Seddon said no word to her about him.

For, though Seddon might not talk, he would inevitably betray his hatred with glances or gestures, or by inference or innuendo or abstract reference. There were many ways he could show her that he did not like Rand.

And so Rand entertained no false expectations.

That was why, when he looked at the girl now, his gaze was direct and steady. Without the conviction that he could never attain his desires he could not have met her gaze with equanimity, for the passion in his heart would have betrayed him. A grim humor kept him from betraying himself now; it kept his face from reddening, as it must have reddened if there were no obstacles and he had been able to stand before her in the rôle of suitor.

The humor was visible in the slight smile that wreathed his lips as he looked at her; the grin grew when he glanced around the room and saw that Seddon had deserted them. At that instant Seddon was standing on the front porch gazing ferociously into the gulf of distance, his soul warped with the bitterness of the rage that had seized him.

Rand's gaze returned to the girl; his voice was gentle and drawling:

"Why, your dad ain't here any more!"

She turned swiftly. "I hadn't noticed!" she said. "That is hardly polite, is it? Do you want to talk with him?"

"Don't bother," he smiled, "we had finished our talk." He opened the outside door and stood on the threshold, looking back at her, his eyes gleaming with an emotion that she could not fathom.

"Your daddy ain't a heap well," he said. "He was

tellin' me, before you come in. It's his heart, I reckon — it's sort of fluttery an' uncertain. At his age a man ought to take a day off once in a while — takin' things easy. He looks sort of excited an' touchy. He's been ridin' too much, mebbe. If I was you I'd kind of hint that he'd ought to hang around the house today — not goin' anywhere. I've told him the same thing, an' when I'm gone you can remind him of it."

An expression of concern leaped into her eyes.

"Do you think it is serious?" she questioned. "Why, I hadn't thought — or noticed. But if you think ——"

He laughed. "I reckon it ain't serious — not if he's careful. You tell him that, so he won't be forgettin' what I told him."

She was looking closely at him, and she saw a subtle, humorous gleam in his eyes.

"Oh," she said, with a relieved smile, "you are only joking!"

"Sure," he laughed, "that's it." It *was* a joke, though a grim one. He wanted to spare her, and he felt that by arousing her concern for her father — and thus inducing her to keep him at the ranchhouse — he might prevent the tragedy that was sure to follow if Seddon disregarded his warning. For he meant what he had said to Seddon.

Because of Lucia Morell's warning he knew his own life was threatened; and if Seddon should apprise

Compton, Webster, and Kinney of the fact that their intentions were known to him, they would be certain to arrange another trap for him.

His warning to Seddon was no idle one. Beneath the mask of mild gentleness on his face as he looked at the girl was an implacable determination to kill her father should the latter apprize his enemies of his knowledge of their scheme to murder him.

The violent, destroying passions he had inherited from his father were tugging at him as he stood there in the doorway. But the girl saw none of them; they were hidden deep, like a slow fire smoldering in the bowels of the earth, ready to belch forth with the raging fury of a volcano.

She saw only the baffling humor in his eyes, and she decided that between him and her father was some jocose secret, an aspect of which Rand wanted to impress upon her parent through her.

"Very well," she said, her fears at rest; "I shall warn him."

She followed him outside, and when he halted near the door and smiled at her she stood silent and watched him, for she felt he had something more to say to her.

"I reckon—now that you know I ain't what you thought I was—that you won't be afraid to ride over to the Three Bar sometime. It ain't what it was when the

Halseys used to live there, but we'll be glad to treat you to the best we've got."

"Then you know I used to visit the Three Bar?"

"Halsey told me." His grin broadened. "There ain't no girls at the Three Bar now; but there's Aunt Betsey an' Uncle Ephraim an' Bud could entertain you right royal. An' if you're still scared of guys with pink hair an' such, why, I'll just mosey into the brush somewhere where you can't look at me."

"You had no right to permit me to say that!" she declared. "You know it was your fault!"

"Well," he said, "there ain't no harm done."

"Aunt Betsey and Uncle Ephraim and Bud," she said. "They sound good, don't they? They hint of sturdiness and old-fashioned reliability."

"They're all wool an' a yard wide," he stated, his eyes glowing. "My mother's sister an' her husband. They was with me in Durango—after my folks died; an' they've been with me since. Neither of them has got any vicious notions."

"And Bud?"

He regarded her steadily. "Bud is an orphan," he said. "His mother is dead, an' his father didn't feel responsible enough to take care of him. I'm tickled to do it. Bud's a humdinger, ma'am," he added with an enthusiastic leap in his voice; "he's the greatest kid that

ever struck this neck of the woods. An' he ain't got no faults—barrin' his cussin'."

"Cussing!" She betrayed her amazement with a blush and a startled look at him. "Do you mean that he curses?"

"Some," he grinned. "I can't coax it out of him. He don't cuss nothin' mean—it's just words that the boys teach him when I ain't around. An' he's so smart that he picks them up, just like a parrot. I'd thrash them out of him—they swear words, I mean—if I thought I could!"

"Oh, don't do that!" she objected. "I'm sure it wouldn't do any good! Why don't you try to shame him! Can't Aunt Betsey do something—or Uncle Ephraim?"

"They've done all they can, I reckon. He just won't listen. I'm a heap scared that if somethin' ain't done he'll turn into a pirate or somethin', ma'am. An' I've thought, since you come home, that mebbe if you'd ride over once in a while you'd be able to teach him better manners. It would sure be a shame to let him grow up to be a cussin', swaggerin' pirate."

"Well, I certainly shall come over!" she declared.

"That's right, ma'am—he'll need you. Why, I reckon right now that he's pretty near hopeless."

"How old is Bud?" Her eyes were wide with interest now, and a certain crafty gleam in Rand's eyes was bat-

tling with the elation in them. He concealed both expressions by veiling his eyes with his lashes.

"He's between four and five, ma'am—an' big for his age. If it wasn't for his cussin' he'd be pretty much of a man. I reckon I'll have to salivate some of the boys if they don't stop teachin' him them things!"

"Well," she said determinedly, "it is time something was done!"

"You could cure him if anyone can," he said, glancing covertly at her, his voice heavy with conviction.

"Then you'll take a whirl at him, ma'am?" he asked presently, when she did not comment upon his last statement.

"Of course. It would be a shame to let him continue in that habit!"

"So it would, ma'am."

His voice trailed off to an expressionless, mechanical monotone. She was looking directly at him when he spoke, and she saw that his lips had not moved, and she knew he had spoken almost automatically, hardly knowing what he had been saying.

Startled and puzzled, she saw that his gaze was directed toward the front of the house. She turned swiftly, to see her father standing at the edge of the front porch. The man's face was pale, his eyes were gleaming with a bitter light, and one hand was resting on his cartridge belt just

above the butt of his pistol; the other, holding a brier pipe with a smoking bowl, was hooked in the belt at his left side.

He was standing slightly sidewise, the pipe projecting from his fingers. He did not seem to be paying any attention to Rand and his daughter.

But Rand knew he had been paying attention. At the instant Rand had begun to utter the words, "So it would, ma'am," Seddon had dropped his right hand to the butt of his pistol.

He had heard every word spoken by his daughter and Rand; he had stationed himself at the porch edge purposely, to hear what Rand would have to say about the boy. And he had determined that if Rand mentioned the boy he would kill him.

And Rand *had* mentioned the boy. However, the black passion that had swept over Seddon had been so strong as to almost overwhelm him, and he had stood for a long time fighting to regain control of himself. For the dread fear of Rand's deadly marksmanship was in his heart, and he knew that when he drew his gun he must use it quickly and accurately.

And at the instant Rand became aware of Seddon's presence at the edge of the porch, Seddon had decided that the time had come.

Seddon's fingers were encircling the butt of his pistol

when Rand moved. His right hand went to his hip with the rapidity of a striking rattlesnake, flashed upward with the same swiftness and precision. The gleam of his pistol and its crashing report came simultaneously.

Seddon's pipe flew to pieces in his fingers, the stem alone remaining. And Seddon staggered, looking foolishly downward at the remains of the pipe, his eyes vacuous, his mouth open. He seemed to have forgotten the gun at his hip; and he turned his face toward Rand and the girl, looking at them as though amazed to see them.

For an instant the girl stood breathless, both hands pressed tightly over her bosom, looking from Rand to her father, a dread horror in her eyes. But when she saw that Rand did not intend to shoot again; that there was a grin on his face—as though the whole thing were a joke, that he was heartily enjoying—she darted to her father and looked him over, searching for a wound.

She saw no wound—Seddon gave no indication of having been wounded, for he was standing erect, both hands at his side, undoubtedly untouched by the bullet. And, indeed, the girl had seen where the bullet had struck; she still saw the evidence in the shape of the pipestem that Seddon's fingers still gripped.

"You're not hurt, Father?" she demanded, seizing one of his arms and twisting him around so that he faced her.

He shook his head negatively, and the girl left him and walked to Rand, standing before him, her eyes blazing with passion.

"Perhaps you can tell me just what you meant by shooting at my father!" she demanded.

He looked at her steadily, the smile on his face becoming enigmatic.

"I reckon I can," he said; "but I won't. Mebbe I shot the pipe out of his hand to warn him that he has a weak heart, an' that if he goes to gettin' reckless he'll die a heap sudden. An' then mebbe I didn't. I don't feel none talkative right now, an' explanations don't come natural to me. Mebbe your dad will do the explainin'."

He grinned felinely at Seddon, who gave him a pallid sneer; then he looked at the girl, in his eyes the baffling humor that had puzzled her all along.

"I was hopin'," he said evenly. Then he paused, to continue almost instantly: "I reckon Bud will go plumb to the devil now!"

He wheeled and walked to the stable, to vanish around a corner of it. Presently he reappeared, on Midnight, and loped the animal over the river trail toward the Three Bar.

CHAPTER IX

TIME TO CLEAN UP

HOWEVER, Rand did not go to the Three Bar. He rode the river trail until he reached a break in the level he had been riding. Striking a cross-trail, he dipped into a narrow valley, which widened as he proceeded, until at last it grew into a basin of immense proportions.

Half an hour after leaving the Bar S he paused to let Midnight drink at a water-hole; and then he rode on again, the big black horse traveling steadily at a pace that soon brought horse and rider to a level where a herd of cattle was grazing.

Skirting the fringe of the herd, Rand came upon the outfit wagon, standing near another water hole. Rand had seen several men of the Three Bar among the cattle as he rode up; but he was looking for Larry Redfern, his range boss. And when he saw him standing near his horse close to the outfit wagon, he veered Midnight, rode to where Redfern was standing, and slipped out of the saddle.

Larry Redfern was tall and slender, clean-shaven, and square-jawed. His face was wrinkled genially, and the

little creases at the corners of his eyes bore eloquent testimony of the quick humor that characterized him. His steel-blue eyes, though, had a level directness in them that warned men that they might trespass too far upon the geniality that radiated from him; and the firm set to his lips indicated that he was a man of tenacity and indomitable purpose.

He grinned at Rand as the latter slid from the saddle and confronted him—the grin of sincere friendship.

“I seen you hittin’ the breeze quite some early,” he said, his eyes twinkling. “Lookin’ for strays, mebbe. They’re rather scarce, though, for the boys have been ridin’ a heap close on them lately.

“It wasn’t strays,” said Rand.

“Shucks,” drawled Redfern; “I wasn’t reckonin’ it was—not too strong! Didn’t she give you no daisy to sport in a buttonhole?”

“She wasn’t allowin’ she was handin’ out any bokays this mornin’,” returned Rand. He smiled at the other, but there was a glint of disappointment in his eyes that was not unnoticed by Redfern.

“So she wouldn’t decorate you none! An’ you thinkin’ of her, an’ talkin’ of her for four years! I’d call that mighty stingy of her!” Redfern grinned toward the rimming hills in the distance and hummed in a dismal monotone:

*My girl she's gone an' left me;
She's travelin' now by rail.
She ain't allowin' to poke along
No more on the old cow trail.*

*She got herself a drummer-man;
A dude with a flowin' tie.
She——*

Glancing sidelong at Rand, he broke off and turned.

"Hell!" he said; "it's somethin' else!"

And then, the spirit of levity falling from him like a mask, he looked at Rand, his face set in stern, rigid lines.

"It's Compton!" he said.

"Now you're guessin'" grinned Rand, his eyes gleaming with a light that made Redfern draw a long, full breath. "They've framed up on me—in Ocate. I didn't take the trouble to get a bill of sale from Mellert when I bought Midnight from him, an' they're chargin' me with stealin' him." Then he related what had occurred at the Bar S, and Redfern's bronzed face wreathed into a smile of delight.

"That's foolin' them!" he declared. "An' you shot the old maverick's pipe out of his fingers, eh?" His eyes gleamed wickedly. "I reckon that if I'd been doin' the shootin'—sayin' I could sling my gun that way—I'd have planted a slug in his breadbasket!"

"I wasn't aimin' to kill him," smiled Rand mirthlessly; "I was just warnin' him. I saw him goin' for his gun, an' there was sure murder in his eyes. I reckon, before I get through with him, I'll have to kill him."

Redfern looked keenly at his employer, and saw the troubled light in his eyes. He had joked about the girl a few minutes before, but he knew the girl had made a deep impression upon Rand—for there had been times during the last four years when Rand had intimated as much. But Redfern said nothing, for this was one of those situations in which advice—or even sympathy—is not to be offered without solicitation.

He listened attentively, however, the lines of his face growing grim and his eyes glowing with passion, while Rand related what he had heard from Lucia Morell.

"Hell's fire!" he broke out when Rand concluded. "It's time for a clean-up! Look here, Rand," he added, "you leave this to me an' the boys!"

"Was you thinkin' I was gettin' ready to leave the country?" Rand's smile was a mixture of amusement and bitterness. "Oh, don't," he added.

Redfern looked downward, not meeting his employer's gaze, which would have confused and embarrassed him. For Redfern knew as well as Rand that the rules of conduct in this country forbade what he had proposed. Rand must not seek to evade a meeting with the gunfighter.

For Seddon, Compton, and Webster would not hesitate to disseminate the news of his refusal. And he could not plead ignorance as an excuse, for Seddon knew he was aware of the plot that had been made to trap him—and he knew that if he failed to go alone to Ocate, Seddon would talk.

However, there was no desire in his mind to escape a meeting with Kinney. From the instant he had heard the news from Lucia Morell, he had known that he would go to Ocate with the deliberate purpose of meeting Kinney. Upon one point only was his mind unsettled, and that was concerning his treatment of the gunfighter.

And he could not decide—for the coldly furious yearning in his heart to slay the man was opposed by a recollection of the gentle precepts of his mother's teaching. He knew he was going to Ocate, and he knew also that he would not decide the question that was in his mind until he was face to face with the gunfighter.

Redfern did not answer, and Rand's smile, as he looked at the other's averted face, was eloquent with gratitude and understanding. When Rand was in his present mood his face bore a strong resemblance to the woman of the photograph at which he often gazed—there was the same luminous softness of the eyes, with a yearning wistfulness gleaming far back in them.

It was an expression that Redfern had never seen, for

Redfern's back had always received it. Face to face with his friend, Rand always masked the expression with cynicism and heavy tolerance.

"So you was thinkin' I'd run out of my responsibilities, eh?" he gibed when at last Redfern turned. "When did I ever give you any sign that I'd turn yellow?"

Redfern grinned guiltily, for he knew from Rand's tone that he had divined the sentiment that was behind his proffer of assistance. Yet no more than Rand did he permit his words to indicate the state of his feelings.

"You're a plumb damn fool!" he declared gruffly. "Slim Kinney's the slickest gunman in this part of the country. He'll salivate you!"

"There's a chance, of course," said Rand gravely. "I reckon that's why I took it into my head to gas to you about it. I've heard of Slim Kinney—an' I know his tricks. Now, knowin' his tricks, or not, if my guns would snag, or I'd miss them when I go after them, why, it's dead certain Bud wouldn't have no dad any more."

He looked straight at Redfern, his smile grave. Redfern scowled, for it seemed to him that there was a presentiment of evil in Rand's heart. Redfern's breath labored in his lungs with the constriction that seemed to be there. But even though he divined that this might be a final parting with his friend, he could not let him know of the affection he felt.

"What you gettin' at?" he demanded gruffly.

"Why, shucks," said Rand, with a smile which told that he was not fooled by Redfern's manner, "it comes to this: If Kinney gets me, you'll have to be Bud's dad. An' I'm askin' you to take good care of him—an' don't let Seddon come near him!"

Redfern started, and his eyes gleamed with the dawning of an amazed understanding.

"Hell's fire!" he exclaimed. "Is Seddon——"

Rand grinned. He wheeled, climbed into the saddle, and set his face toward Ocate. Ten feet from Redfern—who stood rigid, his hands clenched, his glowing eyes reflecting emotions—that could not be expressed in speech—Rand flung over his shoulder a curt "So-long."

He looked back—furtively and swiftly—when he reached the crest of a far rise, and saw Redfern standing at a little distance from his horse, watching him.

Rand's jaws set, he smiled with ineffable gentleness, and rode onward, toward town.

CHAPTER X

KINNEY MAKES READY

HALF an hour later, when Midnight scrambled to the crest of a long rise and was brought to a halt at the edge of a great level which swept away in three directions into a distance so vast that the eye ached in an effort to comprehend it, Ocate lay before horse and rider.

Ocate snuggled a little timber clump that skirted the bank of a shallow arroyo which trickled water over its rock bottom the year through, and from the distance at which Rand now viewed the town it seemed to be no more than a dingy blot upon the calm surface of an emerald sea. Later the green would change to a dusty brown, and the bare sand stretches would show white and dry; the desert weeds would droop; the grass would curl wearily, discouraged; and the dry, light, feathery alkali dust would contest with the hideous cacti for supremacy.

But spring reigned now. And yet it was not to fill his senses with the beauty of the picture that lay behind him that Rand twisted in the saddle and looked back. For it was not the first time he had gazed into the basin from this vantage point.

Disclosed to his view was a vast world of virgin land,

its farther reaches hazy in the distance where some thrusting hills met the azure horizon; a shimmering green world, mighty and vast and silent. Through it all ran a silver ribbon of water—a sinuous trail, as though some giant serpent had passed.

Like a mighty map it lay, with its hills and other elevations in high relief; its depressions dark; its trees dwarfed to the size of bushes by the height from which Rand viewed them; its huge boulders and rock spires seeming like pebbles.

Over it all was a slumbering peace—like that which must have encompassed the world upon the first dawn of its creation.

Straining his eyes, shading them with a hand, Rand could dimly discern the outfit wagon and the herd of cattle dotting the floor of the basin. He was not sure—until he saw movement near the outfit wagon; and then he knew Redfern was waving something at him in final parting. He smiled faintly and rode on—for he had seen what he wanted to see.

And now, as Rand urged Midnight forward, his face grew hard, his eyes malignant, his thoughts wanton and abysmal. In sharp, amazing contrast to the gentle cynicism—a mask for his real emotions when talking with Redfern—he now yielded to the ruthless, destroying passions that had seized him; and for a long time, as

he rode forward, they seethed and raged through him.

All his life he had fought those violent passions, but never had he fought them as hard as he was fighting them now. For until now no man had provoked him as the men waiting for him in town had provoked him. They had planned this thing deliberately, with murderous intent, with a cunning that must have resulted in victory for them had it not been for Lucia Morell.

It was this knowledge which had aroused him; which had fired his blood—the Rand blood, his father's legacy—to the point of violent, unrecking action. And he knew that when he faced "Slim" Kinney in town he would kill him, if he could.

He knew that he could not hope to fight the blood-lust longer, for it had conquered him. He knew it! For the face of his father appeared before him now—as he remembered it, and as it appeared in the photograph that adorned the wall at the Three Bar. And the cruel eyes were glowing with approval and silent applause—and Rand smiled at the mental picture—smiled, his lips curving with a bitter sneer—a sneer for all good impulses; a visible flouting of the gospel of goodwill; in the sneer was contempt for all men who advocated repression; for those who supinely submit to the aggressions of their enemies. And, also, it was a sneer for his mother's memory and for the doctrine of gentleness she had preached.

For he was no longer of his mother's blood. His father was now dominating him—and he rode toward town, eager, exultant—the grim recklessness of his thoughts reflected in his eyes, which were glowing with the wantonness of destruction.

Slim Kinney had greeted the dawn with a speculative eye. Would this day bring Beaudry Rand to "town?"

Kinney hoped it would. For Kinney was a killer of men, who delighted in his profession. And this was the first time in his life that he would be able to kill under the protection of the law. It was an innovation, an astounding reversal of the conditions under which he always had done his killing, and he was eager to experience the venomous thrill he knew it would give him.

He grinned cruelly when, after descending the stairs that led from the room on the upper floor of the Rialto Hotel, in which he had passed the night, he leaned against a corner of the building and watched the sun climb over the peaks of a distant line of hills—the same hills that rimmed the basin in which, at about the time Kinney stood in front of the Rialto, Rand was taking leave of Larry Redfern.

Ocate was asleep when Kinney descended to the street; and in the sepulchral silence which enveloped the town, Kinney drew out his guns and examined them, grinning

his cruel grin. For Kinney took good care of his guns — they were the props of his existence, and he never knew when he might want to use them. Experience had taught him to be prepared.

Restoring the weapons to their holsters, he looked down at his vest, upon which gleamed a small, round badge with the words "Deputy Sheriff" engraved upon it. Kinney grinned again, and with one end of the scarlet scarf that encircled his neck, he polished the bit of metal until it flashingly reflected the first rays of the morning sun.

Kinney took some pride in his personal appearance. His boots were well polished; his corduroy trousers were neatly stuffed into the soft leather tops of the boots; his woolen shirt was clean, and his face smooth-shaven.

Despite these virtues, however, Kinney looked what he was — a conscienceless killer of men.

There was no softening quality in his cruel eyes. His mouth was truculent, with thin lips that drooped at the corners; his nose was long and slender, and depressed at the tip, where it joined the upper lip; and there was a slouching droop to his shoulders which gave the impression of lazy carelessness.

Later, in the street, Kinney was joined by Compton.

Compton had taken a room at the Gilt Edge for the night, and despite the dissipation of the night before, he looked fresh and sleek.

"Expecting Rand in today?" was his question after greeting the gunfighter.

Kinney grinned wolfishly. "There's no tellin'," he said. "He might take a notion to ride in. Anyway, I'm keepin' my eyes peeled."

"Drinking?" suggested Compton, moving his head slightly toward one of the saloons.

"Not none," said the gunfighter. "I'm keepin' a clear head."

Compton's eyes gleamed. "That's right; don't take any chances."

The town was shaking off its lethargy. Sounds began to smite the flatness of the still morning air — doors were opening; somewhere a woman laughed; the sound of men's voices filtered through the wall of the building behind Compton and Kinney, and there came to the ears of both men a heavy clumping upon the board floors within. Ocate was awakening.

"If you think you're needing any help," began Compton. He paused when he saw Kinney's lips curl.

"If you was thinkin' I was needin' help you wouldn't have hired me for this job," shallowly grinned the gunman. "I reckon I'll play her a lone hand."

He took leave of Compton presently and entered a restaurant, where he ate heartily.

There was not the slightest nervousness in Kinney's

manner—he was cool, composed, saturnine. Complacently, coldly, confidently, he regarded the faces of men he saw in the restaurant near him. He grinned broadly at the waitress who served him—so significantly that a crimson stain appeared in the girl's cheeks, inured though she was to the brazenness of men; he joked with the proprietor when he nonchalantly paid his bill at the desk; and he stepped out into the street unconcerned over the prospect of murder, calmly picking his teeth as he glanced down the street.

For though Kinney had looked upon fear, he had never experienced the sensation. He had seen it in men's eyes when he had drawn his guns to kill them—they had exhibited it nakedly in those moments—and he had gloated over them. But he had never known what it was to fear a gun in another man's hand.

Knowing his own ability with the six-shooter—having practised the slippery, snakelike motion that enabled him to get his weapons into action in a shorter space of time than any man he ever had met—he felt the dead certainty of victory in every encounter. He had begun to believe himself invincible, unconquerable. He had become a hardened, calloused, and egotistical disciple of self, answerable only to the malevolent passions that gripped him—the passions that were now gripping him.

He had thrown the toothpick from him, and was wiping

his mouth with a big red bandanna handkerchief, when he heard a voice behind him — a hoarse, low whisper :

"He is coming!"

He turned swiftly, to see Compton standing in a doorway at his back. He grinned evilly, deliberately restoring the handkerchief to its pocket as he stepped out toward the hitching rail that skirted the sidewalk.

He observed that Ocate had completely shaken off its lethargy; that many men were on the street, and that several horses were standing at the various hitching rails in front of the buildings.

And then, with seeming carelessness, he dropped his hands to his sides, sweeping the butts of his pistols with his long, sensitive fingers — and faced to the eastern edge of town. At a little distance out on the big grass level he saw a horseman who rode loosely in the saddle — a tall, lithe man on a big black horse.

The black horse was coming steadily — not fast, but seeming to cover the ground easily and without effort. And yet, despite his lack of visible exertion, it was not many minutes before Kinney saw the black horse at the edge of town. And then a voice floating to Kinney from a point near where the black horse had halted, greeted the rider hilariously :

"Hello, Rand — you ol' son-of-a-gun!"

Kinney grinned sneeringly at the greeting. But the

rider of the black horse came on again, heading the animal to the hitching rail in front of the Gilt Edge—where he dismounted, trailing the reins over the head of the beast. For an instant he stood, looking down the street. Then he walked toward Kinney.

CHAPTER XI

FIRE AND ICE

RAND had not conquered the terrible passions that had gripped him when he had sat on Midnight at the edge of the big plain gazing down into the mighty basin where Redfern stood. They still ruled him, paling his face with their intensity.

Outwardly he was coldly deliberate, and no man, watching him as he walked toward Kinney—noting the faint, mirthless smile on his face—would have divined that he had come to town to kill a man. Nor did Kinney, watching him with the furtive alertness of a carrion bird in the clutch of the hunger-lust, see anything in Rand's manner to warn him that the man was aware of the plot to kill him. For there was in Rand's eyes as he reached Kinney nothing but a gleam of casual inquiry. At least, so it seemed to the gunfighter.

Rand seemed about to pass Kinney—and the gunfighter did not intend to molest Rand yet—for he was in no hurry—when he halted within a step of Kinney and said, slowly, his gaze meeting the gunfighter's, and holding it:

“Seen Webster around?”

Kinney's lips curved into a cold sneer. He had meant to delay, in order to watch Rand — to note the peculiarities of his movements; to acquaint himself with any eccentricity of muscular development he might have — a thing that would show in the way he handled himself; in the way he walked or moved his arms — anything that would indicate the probable speed with which he could get his guns out. For Kinney had not failed to see that Rand wore two guns, and that it seemed, from their positions — low on his hips, with the bottoms of the holsters tied down — that Rand knew how to use them.

Kinney had meant to delay, but Rand's question had provided him with an opportunity he sought, and he could see no reason why he should not get the thing over with as quickly as possible.

Therefore, as he sneered, his eyes glowing with a savage truculence, he backed away slightly, to give himself room to draw his guns.

His hands went to his hips as he edged slightly sidewise in the backward movement; and into his eyes came the merciless, sardonic glitter that told, more eloquently than words, of the bitter lust in his heart.

Rand had not failed to note the movement and the flame in the man's eyes. Therefore he divined that this man was Slim Kinney; and he knew that Kinney had decided to draw his guns upon the slightest pretext.

But nothing in Rand's manner betrayed his knowledge of what threatened. He was going to kill Kinney, he knew; in his veins still surged the violent yearning, the eagerness to take the life of the man who stood before him. And yet about him was no sign of the inward fire that was searing him; and as he looked at Kinney over the short space that separated them, he seemed unperturbed, unsuspecting, and serenely calm.

Watching him closely, however, Kinney had detected a quickening of Rand's eyes, and he knew that despite Rand's unsuspecting manner, he had not failed to suspect what impended.

But the gunfighter delayed. He saw that several men had halted and were watching from various points; he saw that Rand's hands were hanging loosely at his sides, as though he had no thought of his guns. And with witnesses present, Kinney did not care to make the first aggressive movement. So he stood, the fingers of his hands hooked in his cartridge belt, watching Rand, confident that when he had goaded Rand into reaching for his weapons, he would beat him by the infinitesimal fraction of a second which would be necessary for victory.

But a silence came between them, during which neither man's glance wavered. They stood, with the few feet of space between them, looking at each other, while around them all sound ceased, and the men who had halted to

watch, knowing tragedy impended, stood rigid, like graven images—set figures in a grim pantomimic scene.

And as the silence continued, a slight perturbation began to afflict Kinney. Rand knew what impended; for Rand's eyes advertised that he knew—they were agleam with complete knowledge. Kinney could see the knowledge. To be sure, the knowledge was veiled by the flame of a wanton passion in Rand's eyes; but it was there. And if Rand knew, and could betray such icy composure in the face of death, why didn't he reach for his guns—why didn't he move his hands just the merest trifle, to give Kinney the chance he awaited?

But Rand's hands did not move. Nor did his eyes waver. Kinney caught a slight quiver of Rand's lips—they curved just a little, twitching with a sneering contempt.

Ordinarily, such an expression upon an enemy's face would have stung Kinney to action. But in this instance there seemed to be a great drag upon Kinney's desires, a queer cooling of the passion into which he had worked himself. He became aware of a slight, disturbing chill at the pit of his stomach; his eyes wavered just a little as Rand's gaze continued to bore into them; and he could feel the chill stealing from his middle, traveling upward until it began to crawl up his neck and into his face.

Still Rand made no move. Not a muscle of his face

hands, or the cords of his neck — visible above and below the brown scarf he wore — were agitated, except from his slow, regular breathing.

A miracle was here presented to Kinney — the spectacle of a man facing death — knowing it, and betraying not the slightest sign of emotion!

Never before had so odd a thing happened to Kinney! The men he had killed — who had suspected his intentions — had invariably betrayed emotion. Sometimes it had taken the form of complete paralysis; some of his victims had shrunk from him, in the grip of a hopelessness that had made them craven and helpless; still others, sensing the inevitable, had desperately tried to beat him to the draw, their faces demoniac with impotent rage and hate.

But this man betrayed absolutely no sign of emotion. More — Kinney could see that Rand was deliberately delaying the crisis; that he, too, was confident — supremely confident — of his ability in getting his guns into action swiftly. For there was in Rand's eyes and in his manner an air of certainty, of complete conviction, that he would emerge victorious from the encounter that impended.

And suddenly, as Kinney stood silent, his thumbs hooked in his cartridge belt, Rand spoke:

"You're Slim Kinney — eh?" he said coldly. His

voice expressed the contempt that had twitched his lips. "An' you've got a warrant for me — for horse-stealin'. An' you're yearnin' to work your guns on me. Pull 'em — you sneak!"

Kinney did not obey; he stood, his face pallid, his eyes vacuous, staring at Rand as though fascinated by something he saw in the man's manner. Over him had stolen the conviction that it would be impossible for his hands to travel the little distance that separated them from his guns before Rand's weapons would be barking death at him. For though his hands were at the cartridge belt, it seemed to him that many feet, instead of inches, intervened between his hands and the guns.

And while he stood, puzzled over the phenomenon, he saw one of Rand's hands move swiftly, and a piece of paper fluttered in the air and then fell almost at his feet. And then Rand's voice, coming with a snapping command, startled him, so that he took an involuntary step backward, dropping his hands to his sides.

"Pick that up an' read it!" said Rand.

Obediently, though amazed that he should do so, Kinney stooped and took up the paper. It was the bill of sale given Rand that morning by Amos Seddon.

After Kinney finished reading, he silently handed the paper to Rand; and the latter took it, stuffed it into a pocket and sneered malignantly at the gunfighter.

"You was lookin' for me," he said to Kinney as he took a step toward the man. "You figured to perforate me, pretendin' I'd resist arrest. I've called the law bluff. If you've got any man in you, you'll flash your guns — now! I'm yearnin' to blow you apart!"

Kinney did not "flash" his guns. Instead, he stood, his hands at his sides, a sullen, bitter pout on his lips, his eyes gleaming with furious, impotent rage.

For an instant Rand stood, watching the gunfighter; then, with an exclamation of disgust, he wheeled, turning his left side toward Kinney.

As he did so his right hand slipped to the butt of the gun at his right hip — for he had a sudden divination that Kinney would shoot as he turned.

He had correctly judged the gunfighter's character.

For at the instant he wheeled, Kinney's right hand went to his holster. Rand's movement had broken the spell that had held Kinney, and he pulled the trigger viciously.

The weapon went off as its muzzle cleared the holster — the bullet throwing up sand a little to Rand's left. But, blended with the report of Kinney's weapon came Rand's reply — so that the two guns seemed to roar simultaneously.

Kinney's weapon loosened in his grasp; the hand holding it was knocked backward, as though it had been jerked by some unseen force — for Rand's bullet had struck the

cylinder of the gun in Kinney's hand — precisely as Rand had intended it should.

The shock threw Kinney off balance, and before he could recover both of Rand's guns were out, and Rand — his eyes blazing — stood, leaning forward, watching.

Kinney stood, the hand which had held the pistol extended, the fingers spread wide, as they had spread when the pistol had been knocked from his hand; his legs were asprawl, as though to brace himself against further shock; his eyes were aglitter with a venomous light — for now that action had come he had lost his fear, and he was intent on the death of the man who had beaten him in the first clash. Kinney's left hand, the fingers crooked, claw-like, was hovering over the butt of the gun at his left hip, the elbow curved, ready to descend.

Kinney's body was in that position only for a flashing instant. In the next the pistol in Rand's right hand exploded; and Kinney's left hand — which had been thrust swiftly downward toward the stock of his own weapon, halted in mid-air.

Kinney kept it there for a second, while over his face crept an expression of blank stupefaction. Rand's second bullet had shattered the index finger of Kinney's left hand, and when he looked at it, his mouth agape with the furious curses that issued from it, the end of the finger was hanging by a shred from the middle joint.

It seemed to the onlookers that Rand would now kill the gunfighter. And Kinney, too, seemed to be convinced he would get no mercy from Rand, for though he had brought the injured hand around and was holding it crossed over his body and under his right arm, he braced his body for the shock of Rand's bullet—which he expected would come instantly.

CHAPTER XII

VICTORY — AND DEFEAT

FOR the space of many seconds there was a tense, strained, expectant silence. Plainly, Rand was going to shoot again, for his blazing eyes and his sneering, merciless grin told every man who watched him that the mania of murder was in his heart.

And then the tension lessened, and men began to breathe again. For Rand began to relax, slowly, as though the forces in him were battling mightily for supremacy. The sneer on his lips was softened by a sarcastic grin, which grew broader and broader, finally becoming amused contempt as he stepped close to the gun-fighter.

“I reckon I ain’t in a killin’ mood today, Kinney,” he said. “Mebbe it’s because killin’ a shorthorn like you would be plain murder. You’re sure tenderfoot with a gun. I’m lettin’ you off — with your smashed gun an’ no finger on your left hand. I reckon your two-gun days don’t go any more. But if you’ve still got an idea that you can sling your right gun faster than I can sling mine, why, you come gunnin’ for me again some day, an’ I’ll put your *right* hand out of business!”

He left Kinney—who ran into the Gilt Edge to have his finger attended to—and strode down the street to a little frame building over which hung a sign:

SHERIFF

He found Webster seated at his desk, pale, and breathing fast; and as he stepped inside he grinned bitterly at the official and walked close to him.

He stood silent, while Webster read the bill of sale that Rand threw upon the desk. Then, when Webster finished reading and sat staring straight ahead of him at the wall, Rand spoke:

"You hard on first offenders, Webster?"

Webster looked up, met Rand's eyes, shivered, and looked down again, to fumble with some papers on the desk top.

"I'm givin' every man a second chance," he said slowly.

"That's me," declared Rand, grinning coldly at Webster, who met the gaze and cringed from it; "I wouldn't be hard on a first offender. But if a man crowds me—after I give him his chance to play square with me—I'd be a heap eager to put him where he couldn't bother me any more. Do you reckon to understand them principles?"

"Plenty," mumbled Webster.

Leaving the sheriff staring after him, Rand stepped out

into the street and walked back to where he had encountered Kinney. A group of men at the hitching rail fell silent at his approach, though several grinned at him.

"Seen Link Compton?" he inquired of one of the men in the group.

"He's in there—takin' care of Kinney's finger, I reckon," said the man, pointing to the Gilt Edge.

Rand entered the saloon. In a rear room—the dance-hall—he found Kinney and several men—one of them bandaging the man's finger. Link Compton was standing near; and upon the stairway were several women—among them Lucia Morell, who, when she met Rand's eye, flashed an admiring smile at him.

Compton had watched the coming of Rand, though he had pretended ignorance. But when he saw Rand walking toward him, he smiled blandly and folded his arms over his chest.

Rand stepped close to him, and with his hands on his hips, and an icy glitter in his eyes, said slowly and distinctly:

"You takin' Kinney's end of this?"

Compton's eyes quickened; a flush stole up over his collar and suffused his neck and face. His smile, as he gazed with level eyes at Rand, was coldly contemptuous.

"Bah!" he said. "What for? You make me sick with your damned dramatics. Why didn't you kill Kin-

ney? You had him. You're slick with a gun, but you haven't the guts to back it up! Get away from me!" He deliberately turned his back to Rand.

He wheeled again, though, slowly, his body stiffening, when he felt the muzzle of one of Rand's guns denting his right side above the hip. And he moved his head slightly, to look into Rand's blazing eyes, close to his own.

It seemed that this time death surely was hovering near; for death was in Rand's eyes, in his stiffened muscles, in the set of his lips, and in the rigid arm that held the gun against Compton's side.

But Compton grinned. It was a pallid grin—without mirth, without expression of any kind—a mere mechanical grimace. And yet it told every man in the room that Compton was not afraid; it betrayed the man's iron self-control, his contempt of danger, his absolute fearlessness. Also, it was convincing evidence of his conviction, stated previously, to the effect that Rand had not the courage to kill.

"You're still here—eh?" he said as he looked into Rand's eyes, his own becoming expressive of mockery when he saw that the other's passions were already beginning to subside. "Still here—and still tryin' to be dramatic. Pull the trigger, and be damned!" And again he turned his back, to begin talking with a man who stood near him, ignoring Rand completely.

Rand stood, gun in hand, for a short space—though the time seemed longer to the men in the room, who were watching him. For it seemed to the men that Rand would shoot. And then lungs sighed in process of deflation, and men began to look at one another again.

For they began to understand that Rand would not shoot. They saw the passion leave his face; they watched him, noting the old sarcastic smile returning, to wreath his lips. Then he sheathed his gun, looked coldly around the room, his gaze resting nowhere, but convincing every man in the room that it had rested upon all.

There was no sound in the room as Rand walked to the front door and stepped down into the street. Men who had congregated around the front door made room for him as he went out. He spoke to none of the men on the outside. Instead, silent, frowning, his eyes reflecting the terrific emotions that seethed within him, he mounted Midnight and sent him thundering over the plains toward the basin in which he had left Larry Redfern—away from the scene of the defeat of the inherited paternal passions that had driven him to town—away from the scene of the victory that had been won by his mother's memory.

CHAPTER XIII

SEDDON EXPLAINS

AMOS SEDDON had not gone to town upon the forbidden day. Nor had he left the vicinity of the ranchhouse. Once, when standing on the porch, he had seen a Bar S puncher riding toward the house, and he had gone inside, to seat himself glumly in a chair, sending out word by Eleanor that he was "too sick to see anybody."

And Seddon was sick, for the recollection of the incident of the morning remained vivid in his memory. He still felt the terrible nausea which had afflicted him when Rand's bullet had struck his pipe. And he spent much of his time mentally reviewing the incident, and thanking his God that Rand's mood had been grimly playful instead of murderous.

Seddon refused to reply to any of Eleanor's questions regarding the incident of the shooting; he would offer no explanation beyond the gruff comment that "Rand's always pullin' off deals like that—he thinks he's jokin'."

But the girl was not satisfied with that explanation, for she thought she had seen, just in the instant before Rand had used his pistol, a tenseness in her father's attitude as

he had stood at the porch edge, and a certain flash of passion in his eyes which had seemed to indicate the imminence of action on his part.

And then there was Rand's quick change of manner after the shooting—the sardonic expression of his eyes, and the humorous malice in his voice when he told her to ask her father for an explanation for the shooting. The actions of both men seemed to prove there was an undercurrent of hostility between them—a mystery which she must solve.

However, there seemed to be no way to go about that task, for she could get nothing illuminating from her father—and she could not go to Rand with her questions.

Her father's attitude puzzled her; for it seemed to her that he should betray resentment toward Rand—that is, of course, if he thought Rand had tried to kill him. To be sure, if Rand's bullet had been directed at the pipe intentionally, and there had been no murderous impulses in Rand's mind, that would make a difference.

And she began to believe that Rand had not meant to kill her father, for with a recollection of Rand's manner toward her—the gentle graveness of his face, and the humor that seemed always ready to flash into his eyes—it seemed to her that he could not possess the viciousness of character that would impel him to kill her father in her presence—or anywhere, for that matter.

For she could not believe that any man with eyes like Rand's could have inherited vicious traits. She found herself hoping that when the explanation did come Rand would emerge with credit.

And in the evening of the next day—after Seddon returned from a trip to where the outfit was working, it appeared to her that the explanation had come.

For at the supper table Seddon looked steadily at her, smiling slightly.

"Rand shot a man in Ocate yesterday," he said deliberately.

She did not answer, but drew a full breath and leaned her elbows on the table, watching her father intently, for she detected a change in his manner from yesterday.

And a change *had* come over Seddon. During the day Link Compton had ridden over to see him, and Compton had cursed him for giving Rand the bill of sale for Midnight. Compton had been in a furious rage over the failure of his plans to kill Rand; and Seddon was still resentful over the tone Compton had employed in accusing him of cowardice.

Compton had related what had happened in the Gilt Edge, when Rand had shoved the pistol into his side. Compton had told the incident for the purpose of comparing his own conduct with that of Seddon's, under conditions almost similar.

“He’s yellow!” Compton had declared. “He’s afraid to sling a gun in earnest!”

However, Seddon was convinced that Rand was not the coward Compton had termed him. He felt that Rand must have had reasons for not shooting Kinney or Compton. Seddon had no deep faith in the theory that Rand was afraid to kill a man, for he had seen murder in Rand’s eyes on more than one occasion, and as he had told Compton before—and as he had told him that day—he had no yearning to be the first man to test the popular theory.

Seddon was convinced that Rand had been deeply in earnest when he had warned him to say nothing derogatory about him to Eleanor. Seddon was convinced that Rand would kill him if he poisoned the girl’s mind against him, and he was determined to take no chances. Not now, at least. At some future time—if conditions were favorable, he would be revenged upon Rand. But not now. And therefore, looking at his daughter across the table, with the memory of Compton’s treatment of him fresh in mind, and with Rand’s warning to urge him, his eyes held a gleam of satisfaction.

“Yes—shot a man,” Seddon went on; “a gunfighter named ‘Slim’ Kinney.”

“Rand killed him?” questioned the girl, with bated breath.

“Shot a finger off him,” Seddon informed her, and

looked speculatively at her when she sighed and sank back in her chair in apparent relief.

"It was mighty odd—an' slick—they tell me," Seddon went on.

"An accident, I presume."

"Accident, nothin'!" declared Seddon. "Rand done it deliberate! First he knocks one of Kinney's guns out of his hand—slammin' the cylinder with a bullet—which Weaver, of the Circle L, says was the slickest shootin' he ever seen—seein' as how Rand's back was pretty well turned to Kinney. An' then, when Kinney reaches for his other gun, Rand busts his forefinger, so that he'll never be able to pull a trigger with it again!"

Eleanor's eyes were bright, and there was color in her cheeks that had not been there an instant before.

"Then Rand's shooting your pipe was not an accident?" she said.

"Accident, nothin'!" Seddon declared, with considerably less emphasis than he had used before when uttering the same words. "Rand shootin' that pipe out of my hand was done deliberate—just like he busted Kinney's finger. I reckon you don't figger that Rand wanted to kill *me*!"

"I was afraid he had tried to."

Seddon laughed harshly. He hated to say complimentary things about Rand, but certainly, in view of

Rand's warning, he could not tell his daughter that Rand had designs on his life. Besides, Rand had not intended to kill him—Seddon knew the shooting of the pipe had been merely a warning.

Seddon remembered Rand's reference to his heart, after the shooting, and he grinned.

"He was testin' me, I reckon," he said. "You see, when he was in the office—before I called you—I was tellin' him about my heart bein' weak. An' he laughed at me, an' said he didn't believe it—an' that some time—when I wasn't expectin' it—he'd shoot at me—to see how close he could come to me without hittin' me. I told him if he pulled off anything like that I'd come right back at him. An' when I seen him standin' there, talkin' to you—I kind of thought he'd be tryin' to do it. An' he did—damn him!"

"Oh!" said the girl, relief in her voice. "Was that all?"

"Wasn't that enough?" demanded Seddon, grimly pleased over the lie. "An' I reckon I've got a weak heart, all right, for I wasn't able to stir out of the house yesterday—I was that nervous an' jumpy."

"Why didn't you tell me that yesterday?" demanded the girl.

"I didn't want to worry you."

"But you are telling me, now."

"An' I'm better, now," he returned, grimly.

She laughed, looking at him with eloquent eyes.

"Why didn't you return Rand's shot — as you promised him you would?" she asked.

"A man with a weak heart ain't got any business gunnin' for Beau Rand," he said evenly. "That shootin' of his was so close that there wasn't any fun in it."

She drew a deep breath and smiled at Seddon.

"I am glad it was only a joke, Daddy — even though it was a grim one, and dangerous. For now I shall be able to go over to the Three Bar and look after that little boy's education. I suppose you heard Rand speaking of him. His name is 'Bud.' And Rand says the men of the Three Bar have been teaching him to swear — to 'cuss,' Rand says. And I am going to break him of the habit. Don't you think I ought to?"

"I don't reckon I'd go to monkeyin' with Rand's kid," growled Seddon, his face suddenly growing very red — so that, in order to keep Eleanor from suspecting anything, he had to get up and leave the table.

The girl would have liked to ask questions about the boy; but when Seddon left the table it was to go out into the yard, where he stood for a long time in the darkness. And had Bud been there to listen to him he might have added some picturesque and expressive oaths to his vocabulary.

CHAPTER XIV

A MATTER OF NERVE

RAND did not pull Midnight down until the black reached the crest of the slope from which, some time before he had looked back and down into the mighty basin at Larry Redfern standing near the outfit wagon.

Rand saw the outfit wagon, now—a brown dot on a carpet of green. He could see cattle scattered over the floor of the basin, and horsemen moving about; and he felt the peaceful atmosphere of the scene—the shimmering sunlight over it all, creating a slumberous haze, the beauty of which brought him a pang of regret.

For all this beauty was in sharp contrast to the evil that dwelt in his heart; all this peace and quiet caused him to realize more keenly the turmoil and the tumult that seethed in his veins.

He got down from Midnight and stood, his arms resting on the saddle, his face pale, his eyes closed, his sinewy body slack as though a great weariness had descended upon him. Standing there, he looked like a man who had ridden far and fast to escape some threatening danger—a danger that had almost overwhelmed him, leaving him unnerved, terrorized, and exhausted.

Once again had he conquered the evil passion which, like an inward living flame, scorched and seared him with the intensity of its heat; once again had he kept the fire from consuming him. But in conquering he had been forced to suffer the shame and the obloquy of public insult from a man he hated with a bitterness that sometimes appalled him.

He had not dared to kill Kinney when the latter had stood defenseless before him; he had not dared to direct his bullets at the gunfighter—nor, later in the Gilt Edge had he dared to yield to the malignance of the passions that had gripped him. For though he had gone to town purposely to kill Kinney and Compton, there had flashed into his mind at the last minute the image of his mother's face, pale and concerned, her eyes upon him glowing with cold reproach.

Kinney's conduct had brought the mental picture into Rand's vision. Until he faced Kinney beside the hitching rail he had intended to kill him. For he had reveled in the murder-lust that had seized him. But something in the gunfighter's manner, in the cringing dread that had seemed to afflict him shortly after Rand appeared before him, had suddenly cooled Rand's passions. It had seemed to him that shooting Kinney would have been too much like murder.

For he knew he would beat Kinney when the critical

moment came—and he knew that Kinney, after the first glance, also realized it. It had been when the sarcastic smile had begun to appear on Rand's face that the mental picture of his mother flashed before him. And the sarcasm he felt had been directed at himself—it was the savage cynicism of his father sneering at the maternal influences that had conquered him. So, fighting—and losing—the bitter battle, he had merely wounded Kinney.

It had been the same way when he had gone into the Gilt Edge. Thoughts of his mother had influenced him while he had been talking with Webster; but as soon as he stepped into the street a new savage impulse had seized him, and he had determined to kill Compton when he had entered the saloon.

But there, again, had his mother's face appeared before him—he had been looking at her when he had stuck the muzzle of his gun into Compton's side.

He had known, then, that he dared not yield to the violent impulses that had driven him to town—for had he done so the reproach in his mother's eyes would have haunted him all the days of his life. Nor, never again would he have been able to look at the picture of her—the picture that adorned the wall of his room at the Three Bar.

Therefore the mingled emotions of victory and defeat assailed him as he stood on the brow of the hill overlook-

ing the big basin; but they were emotions out of which he could gain no consolation. For when he had faced Compton in the saloon—after he had decided not to use the gun that was making a dent in the man's side—after he had conquered the yearning to kill—he had not dared to knock Compton down, for fear the blow would arouse the blood-lust again and he would yield to it.

He had done then what he thought was the wise thing—he had grimly closed his ears to Compton's insults; he had fled from the temptation to slay.

But now the shame of his decision was upon him; and the bitter curses that issued from between his clenched teeth, the flaming scorn and contempt of self that gleamed in his eyes, told how bitterly he regretted the weakness that had come over him in town.

He climbed into the saddle presently, pale, his jaws set, and his eyes glowing with a brooding, sullen light; sending Midnight slowly down the slope.

And when he reached the floor of the basin he saw that Larry Redfern had not moved very far from where he had stood when Rand had last seen him—he was leaning against the outfit wagon, his back to Rand, apparently not having seen or heard Rand coming toward him.

He turned, though—swiftly—as Rand rode close to him; his right hand dropping to the holster at his hip. On Redfern's face, too, there was a sullen expression—a

savage truculence which told of the bitterness of his thoughts.

And his first words revealed what those thoughts had been; for when he flashed around and saw Rand, his face lighted, and he fairly yelled at Rand:

“You old son-of-a-gun! You got him!”

In an instant he was at Rand's side, gripping one of his hands, trying to pull Rand off his horse. And when Rand resisted, pulling back, his face flaming with the shame of the thing that had happened to him, Redfern squeezed the captured hand hard and looked gleefully up into Rand's face.

“You old son-of-a-gun! I never thought you could do it! Tell me about it, you close-mouthed Apache! Tell me how you done it? Don't set there blushin' like a house afire, keepin' me in suspense! Spit it out!”

“Kinney ain't dead,” said Rand. “I busted his hand—that's all. I couldn't kill him—he looked too—too easy, I reckon.”

“Easy! Oh—why, hell's fire! Easy? Kinney easy?” Redfern's voice grew low and awed; he pushed his hat back and brushed his forehead with a hand, amazed, stunned. “You busted Kinney's hand—an' you say he's easy! Good Lord! I knowed you was slick—but—Kinney!”

Rand grinned without mirth. “I was goin' to kill him,”

he confessed; "but when I'd knocked his gun out of his hand — snappin' a shot at it when he tried to draw, when my back was turned — an' he stood there, goin' for his other gun, an' lookin' so white an' scared — I didn't have the nerve to kill him. An' later, when I got Compton in the Gilt Edge, I didn't have the nerve to kill him, either. He wouldn't draw his gun. I've sure made a mess of this deal," he concluded bitterly.

"Holy smoke!" breathed Redfern; "no nerve! He goes to town, deliberate — not lettin' me go with him — to meet Slim Kinney — with Kinney waitin' to kill him. He knocks Kinney's gun to smithereens, an' busts Kinney's hand — makin' a tenderfoot sucker out of the slickest gun-fighter in the country. Then he busts into the Gilt Edge — with everything ag'in him, an' scares Link Compton so that he don't know he's got a gun! An' then he comes back here an' yaps disappointed like, because he ain't got no nerve. Hell's fire — what does he call nerve — that's what I'd like to know?"

Redfern asked his questions of the yawning distance, as though that distance were a third person.

But his enthusiasm was answered by a saturnine smile from Rand. He said lowly: "I had to tell you;" wheeled his horse and rode away, toward the Three Bar, leaving Redfern to look after him in puzzled astonishment.

CHAPTER XV

SWEARING TO A LIE

RAND'S temperament was not volatile; there was no infirmity of purpose in his moods; and of the two influences which shaped his conduct toward his fellow-men, that exerted by his mother's memory was the stronger. She had trained him, had warned him; and he was dominated by the gentle impulses she had bequeathed him. It was only when he was goaded and provoked by antagonistic forces that the turbulent, maddening passions seized him; and even then he fought grimly to conquer.

Men had seen those passions slumbering in him. Larry Redfern knew of their existence—for in those moments when he and Rand were together, with the gentleness of a trusting friendship between them, Redfern had seen the hard glint far back in the man's eyes.

But Larry Redfern knew—as Uncle Ephraim and Aunt Betsy knew—that Rand normally was ruled by the better impulses of his nature; they knew, too, that he fought continually to overcome the vicious moods that seized him. Uncle Ephraim and Aunt Betsey, aware of the legacy of savagery, pitied him; but Redfern, knowing that in all men reigned much that was elemental—a

vicious strain that at times sent their thoughts back to the abysmal period—smiled wisely at Rand's moods.

He was convinced that the impulses of the primal man were somewhat stronger in Rand than in many other men—that was all. Aroused, Rand was cynical, malignant, dangerous; but that mood conquered, he was gravely gentle, soft-spoken, with a slow humor that had endeared him to his relatives and to his men.

Rand spent two or three days overcoming the venomous thoughts that racked his soul. During this time he was absent a great deal from the ranchhouse, spending much of his time with the outfit on the open range.

Several times, brooding over what had happened to him in Ocate, he was on the point of yielding to impulses to return and complete the work he had begun, but each time a recollection of Redfern's words dissuaded him. If Redfern could see nothing shameful in his conduct it must be that his own mental vision was at fault. For Larry had the disturbing habit of speaking plainly, without prejudice.

At any rate, Rand's mood slowly changed. His face, set in grim lines, began to relax; the cold, hard gleam in his eyes began to soften. And one day, on his way to the ranchhouse, he grinned widely at the space and the silence.

He had reflected much over Kinney—he kept seeing the man's face as it had been in the moments preceding the

shooting. Blank stupefaction had been in the man's eyes.

"I reckon he was plumb scared!" Rand told himself as he rode homeward. "If I had showed that kind of 'yellow'—now!"

Then he laughed, audibly. For his thoughts went to Compton. For, despite Compton's manner, there had been something akin to fear in *his* eyes, too, when they had met Rand's, in the saloon.

Rand was convinced that one day he and Compton must settle their differences—that was inevitable. For their hatred of each other was like some strong poison. And one day, when the feeling between them grew intolerable, they would clash.

But Rand's thoughts this afternoon did not long remain on Compton and Kinney. He kept thinking of Eleanor Seddon, and the blazing flame in her eyes when he had shot Seddon's pipe out of his hand.

He wondered much over the incident, and over what had happened after he had ridden away.

He knew Seddon—Seddon had no moral courage. Would Seddon betray him? He thought not. For Seddon would not want the girl to know about Bud. To be sure, *he* would not tell Eleanor about the boy, even if Seddon were to poison the girl's mind against him—for he would not want the girl to suffer the humiliation the knowledge would bring upon her.

But Seddon would *think* he would tell, and that fear would compel Seddon to silence regarding the hostility between them. Seddon would make some plausible explanation for the shooting of the pipe—that was certain.

And if Seddon *did* explain, what would follow? Why, Eleanor Seddon, her doubts removed, would keep her promise to ride over to the Three Bar for the purpose of reforming Bud! For Rand had seen that implacable purpose in her eyes!

And Bud! Rand grinned widely as he neared the house.

Unsaddling Midnight, and turning the animal into the corral, he entered the house.

Uncle Ephraim was seated on the back steps, smoking, and talking confidentially to Bud. Aunt Betsy was seated at the kitchen table, peeling potatoes.

She heard Rand come in the side door, and she looked furtively at him over the tops of her spectacles as he halted in the doorway that led from the kitchen to the dining-room. There was a grin on Rand's face, and by that token Aunt Betsey knew he had conquered the dark passions that for days had beset him. For she had heard from Larry Redfern the story of what had happened at Ocate.

Rand had not mentioned the incident, and had it not been for Larry, Aunt Betsey would not have known there had been trouble, for though, when Rand had been in

the house, he had been silent and thoughtful, there had been no change in his manner toward Aunt Betsey, Uncle Ephraim, or Bud. But that grin told Aunt Betsey many things, and she answered it with a smile in which there was a devout thankfulness.

And she thrilled with emotion when Rand walked to her, placed a sinewy arm around her shoulders and hugged her silently.

"You're a regular bear, Beaudry!" she exclaimed when he released her. She raised her head and looked up at him, her eyes shining. "I'm awfully glad you didn't," she said.

"Didn't what?" He glanced quickly at her.

"Glad you didn't kill that Ocate gunfighter. Don't you ever, Beaudry! Whatever happens, don't do that! I've heard your father say, many times, that once you start — once you kill a man in passion — you can't stop killing. It's like an appetite for strong drink; it takes hold of you, your father said, and makes you drunk. And there are always men who will dare you and defy you and taunt and mock you — to make you kill. There'll be gunmen who will be jealous of you; who will ——"

"Who's been talkin'?" inquired Rand. He seized her face in both his hands. "Larry?" he questioned.

She nodded. "He was *so* tickled!" she declared. "He said he just couldn't help telling me!"

Rand grinned. "I'll be tellin' Larry somethin'," he threatened.

"Shucks, you won't!" she laughed.

Rand left her and strode to the door. "You had any visitors besides Larry?" he called back to Aunt Betsey over his shoulder.

"Nobody but Larry and one of the men."

Rand bent down and seized Bud about the middle, swinging him upward to his shoulder, the boy grinning hugely from his elevation.

"We're goin' to look at the horses, Bud," said Rand as he strode out of the house.

They did look at the horses. Rand perched Bud on the top rail of the corral fence and, with the sinking sun behind them, they watched the several animals within the enclosure, as, with the knowledge that they were observed, they whipped the deep dust of the place until it rose in clouds.

Bud had had curls; the evidence of them still existed on the top of his head. The top of his head, however, was the only place where their presence might have been detected, for elsewhere his hair was cut short, "like a man's," at his own request.

Manliness was in Bud's manner as he sat on the fence watching, with a critical eye, the movements of the horses. His little lips were tight-set, his eyes gleaming.

"Some day I'm goin' to ride that there mustard horse!" he told Rand.

"You sure are — some day!" assured the latter. "An' that day ain't goin' to be long in comin'. For," he added, with a shrewd look at Bud, his eyes gleaming with a guilty, shameful expression for the thing he was about to do, "you're pretty much of a man right now, ain't you?"

The boy nodded, and Rand continued slowly:

"You like that mustard horse, eh?" he said. "You ain't got any use for that damned monkey-faced sorrel?"

The boy shot a quick glance at Rand's face; it was expressionless. It was also very red, but Bud did not see that, for he was looking at Rand's face for signs. There were no signs. But Bud thought Rand was breathing heavily.

Bud looked at the sorrel horse and then again at Rand's face. It was the first time he had ever heard a profane word. For Rand's command regarding the use of profanity within hearing distance of the boy had been vigorous, and the outfit had religiously obeyed him. Of course, Uncle Ephraim and Aunt Betsey did not swear.

Bud wondered if he had quite understood Rand. He looked intently at Rand, and Rand saw the question in his eyes.

"You ain't got any use for that damned monkey-faced sorrel, eh?" repeated Rand.

"I wouldn't ride any damned monkey-faced sorrel!" declared the boy.

Rand buried his face in his arms, and Bud did not see the unholy mirth that suffused it. Nor did Bud see any of the expressions that wreathed Rand's face, as with diabolical craft and suggestion he continued to teach the youngster proficiency in the art of profane expression.

There came a time, after a while, when Bud's proficiency became established, when Rand took the boy from the fence and sent him into the house.

Standing at the stable door, Rand looked through the glowing twilight toward the space that stretched toward the Bar S.

"I reckon she won't ketch me in a lie about Bud's swearin'," he said, grinning hugely, though guiltily.

CHAPTER XVI

AN INTERLUDE WITH CUPID

UPON Silver, the horse that had taken her to the timber in which she had first met Beaudry Rand, Eleanor was riding toward the Three Bar to keep her promise to instill into Bud's mind a horror for all things profane.

It was several days following that upon which Rand had cunningly tutored Bud; and in the interval between the day of the teaching and that upon which Miss Seddon was riding toward the Three Bar, Bud had spent much of his spare time seated on the top rail of the fence near the gate, gravely swearing at the animals within the enclosure.

He was there today; he had been there for many minutes, following the movements of the sorrel horse with frowning glances. He had not seen Miss Seddon coming toward him across the plains; he did not see her, nor hear her, when she at last rode up to the corral gate and sat silently in the saddle, looking at him.

Bud's gingham pinafore — today a pink one — was immaculate, for Aunt Betsey had been apprized of Miss Seddon's determination to visit Bud — though Rand had not

mentioned the real reason for her proposed visit—and Aunt Betsey had kept the boy spick and span in anticipation of the event.

And so Bud looked invitingly fresh. It did not take Miss Seddon an instant to warm toward him; and she sat in the saddle, smiling at his back with a tenderness which Bud would have appreciated had he seen.

But Bud's thoughts and attentions were gravely centered upon the sorrel horse. He had come to the conclusion that the sorrel was what Rand had said it was. And now, for the twentieth time, he was gravely expressing his opinion.

"You're a damned monkey-faced sorrel!" he said; "an' I wouldn't ride you—so there!"

Bud said more. For a child, unused to a new language, he did well. With a fluency born of a keen liking for the picturesque method of expression, he nobly set to work to defame the sorrel. So complete was his work that it caused the lady behind him to grow speechless with amazement.

She got down silently, her face crimson, and stealthily approached the criminal. And the first Bud knew of her presence was when he felt a soft hand on his shoulder, and a softer voice whispering into his ear:

"Little boy—Bud; you mustn't say those naughty things!"

Bud twisted on the post top and surveyed the lady wonderingly. He never had seen a girl quite like the one who was close to him now; never had he thought there was so much beauty and winsomeness in *any* girl. And so Bud's thoughts grew shamefully confused. He wanted to be a man, like his father, and those swear words sounded big and important to the ear; they had a snap and a resonance all their own. But somehow, there was that in the lady's reproaching and rebuking eyes which convinced him, almost, that the words should not be used.

But Bud was loyal to his father, and he bravely straightened.

"Why?" he protested.

"God doesn't like little boys who swear," the lady informed him gently.

"I don't like that damned monkey-faced sorrel!" declared Bud, unimpressed.

The lady tried a new trick; she was cunningly resourceful.

"Bud," she said, smiling sweetly at him, "I'm afraid I won't like you if you say that again."

Bud smirked uncertainly. He wanted the lady to like him, and yet he wanted to be a man. Still, there was a coldness in the expression of the lady's face which warned him that if he persisted he would lose her; and so the smirk became a broad, winning smile.

"I won't say it again," he conceded.

Instantly the lady smiled with him, and he impulsively hugged her as she lifted him down from the post.

He watched her as she threw the reins over Silver's head, looping them around the post upon which he had been sitting; then she grasped him by a hand, and started toward the house.

She saw Aunt Betsey watching her from the front doorway, with Uncle Ephraim behind her, looking over her shoulder. And upon Aunt Betsey's face was a welcoming smile. Uncle Ephraim, too, was smiling. And Bud smiled also, and snuggled close to the lady, for he liked her very much.

And still another person in the vicinity was smiling. He had seen Miss Seddon riding over the plains toward the ranchhouse, and, having noted Bud's position on the post, he had discreetly retired to a point within the stable—not more than twenty feet distant from the corral gate—where, with a gleeful eye at a convenient knot-hole, and nothing but a thin, board wall intervening, he had heard every word spoken by Bud and the radiant lady visitor.

No emotion of shame seemed to afflict the culprit; there was no gleam of guilt in his eyes. And when, after a while—after Miss Seddon had been received and made to feel welcome by Aunt Betsey and Uncle Ephraim, and both

had withdrawn, leaving Miss Seddon alone on the porch with Bud—the culprit shamelessly emerged from the stable and made his way to the porch.

Miss Seddon had not seen him emerge from the stable; she was not aware of his presence until she saw Bud—who was sitting on her lap—grin widely. Then she turned, and her face became radiant again.

“Oh,” she said; “it is you?”

“I reckon it’s me, ma’am,” he grinned. “Looks like you ain’t figurin’ to lose any time workin’ on Bud.”

“Poor little fellow,” she said, smoothing Bud’s short hair. “He needs someone to care for him. It seems Aunt Betsey has never heard him—er—use profanity. Besides, she has plenty to do to take care of the house. When I got here some time ago, Bud was sitting on the gatepost there, swearing horribly.”

“He’s a wolf at it, ma’am,” stated Rand gravely; “he’s a dyed-in-the-wool pirate for cussin’. Why, ma’am, I’ve heard him slingin’ words around that would scare a steer off the range.”

“How awful!” exclaimed Miss Seddon. “And he is such a nice little fellow, too!”

“As to his cussin’,” resumed Rand, his gaze unwavering as it met the lady’s; “there’s a heap to do in the reformin’ line. Teachin’ is what he wants, ma’am—plenty of teachin’.”

"I'll do what I can, of course," stated the lady. "But you might help, too. Why, he swears horribly!"

"I was helpin' him only last night," assured Rand, without winking an eyelash. "What he needs is someone like you, ma'am, to wean him from them terrible habits of cussin'."

However, Bud received little instruction that day. Indeed, it seemed to Bud that he was being sadly neglected. For though he felt the lady's hand gripping his, and at times felt her fingers running lingeringly through his hair, he became aware that her attention was centered chiefly upon his father.

He watched closely, unnoticed by both, and saw the lady's eyes glow in those moments when Rand was not looking at her, when he seemed, his face slightly flushed, to be gravely thinking. But always, Bud noticed, she drooped her eyes when Rand turned to look at *her*. And at such times Rand's eyes did the glowing.

It was puzzling to Bud; he would have wished their eyes to glow when both were looking.

Later, Bud was lifted from his comfortable position on the lady's lap and placed upon the top step of the porch. He heard them speak of "riding," and, receiving a final tender patting on the crown of his head, he was left disconsolate and brooding on the porch, to watch Silver and Midnight lope away toward the timber, their riders laugh-

ing and talking, seemingly having forgotten that such a thing as profanity had ever been mentioned.

Bud watched them until they vanished behind a ridge in the distance; then he got down from the porch, walked to the corral gate, climbed the post, and began, with grave deliberation, to voice his opinion of the sorrel horse.

CHAPTER XVII

A FRESH DEAL

FOR a time, following the departure of Rand, Link Compton stood in the rear room of the Gilt Edge talking with his friends. There was a smile on Compton's face as he talked, and his eyes were glinting with a bland good humor; for he had publicly defied Rand, and he was filled with a grim amusement over the occurrence. The big man could be engaging when he desired, and now his friends grinned sympathetically with him, remembering his icy composure when facing the passion in Rand's eyes.

Compton did not speak of Rand. When an admirer mentioned the occurrence, Compton smilingly rebuked him.

But after Kinney's hand had been attended to, and the gunfighter and Compton were in the street, walking toward the sheriff's office, Compton looked at the other, a gleam of venomous disgust in his eyes.

"You're a hell of a gunslinger!" he charged. "Lost your nerve, eh? You stood there shivering like a coyote in a blizzard, and let him bust you wide open! You didn't even get started!"

The reason Kinney hadn't got "started" was a mystery

to the gunfighter himself. Even now, having had some time to meditate upon the miracle, he was mystified. He brushed his good hand uncertainly over his eyes, as though to dispel the blank amazement that still afflicted him.

"That ain't never happened to me before," he muttered. "He had me clean flustered. I didn't seem to know I had any guns on me; an' when I did get goin', it was too late."

Compton laughed grimly, contempt of Kinney blazing in his eyes.

"Well," he said, "we lost that trick. There's no use whining over it."

They found Webster in his office, and they went in, Kinney dropping himself disconsolately in a chair, Compton standing, huge and furious, beside Webster's desk.

"Webster," he said coldly, meeting the other's gaze, "somebody peached. Who was it?"

Webster spread both hands upon the desk, the palms upward, in eloquent denial of all responsibility.

"How in hell should I know?" he growled. "The first I knowed everything was goin' to smithereens was when I seen Kinney standin' there like a snubbin' post, his eyes poppin' out of his head — scared plumb stiff. An' Rand, grinnin' like a tiger, throwin' a scrap of paper at his number 'leven's!"

Compton looked at Kinney. "What was written on that paper?"

"It was a bill of sale for that Midnight horse — from Seddon," growled Kinney.

Compton's face paled with rage. He strode out of the office and mounted his horse. Riding southward many miles, he encountered the Bar S outfit.

Seddon was not with the outfit.

Compton waited, expecting him. But Seddon did not come that day; and Compton, reluctant to visit the Bar S ranchhouse for fear Eleanor Seddon might overhear some of the vitriolic things he intended to say to her father, stayed with the outfit.

It was not until sunrise the next day that Seddon appeared. And then, drawing the Bar S owner aside, Compton learned the story of Rand's appearance at the Bar S to demand the bill of sale. But the information came after Compton had charged Seddon with disloyalty to him.

With rage still gripping him, Compton abruptly left Seddon and rode back to town.

He spent the greater part of the day in the saddle, riding to the Two Link from the Bar S camp, and talking long and earnestly with his range boss. Then, late in the afternoon, he was standing near the front door of the Gilt Edge talking with Labrue, the proprietor, a suave, smooth-spoken, dark-faced man, with sleek, black hair and steady, cruel eyes.

He laughed harshly while Compton was talking with him.

"So, she did that, eh? Queered the whole deal. I was wondering if it wasn't something like that. What? Sure! I don't give a damn what you do to her!"

Smiling mirthlessly, Compton walked through the bar-room, strode across the dance-hall, and climbed the stairs to the second story. There were a number of doors off a hall, but Compton did not hesitate, pausing before one and knocking softly upon it.

When the door swung open an instant later—just a trifle, to permit a woman's face to peer outward inquiringly—Compton placed a shoulder against it, and forced his way into the room, closing the door behind him, barring it, and grinning sneeringly at Lucia Morell who, arrayed in a loose gown, her hair disheveled, her eyes gleaming with fury over the ruthlessness of Compton's entrance, stood back at a little distance from the door, glaring at him.

"Clever—eh, Lucia?" said Compton, his lips smiling, though his eyes were gleaming with a ferocity that was unmistakable. "Ha, ha! You almost got away with it, too! How did you get word to him?"

The girl stiffened; her chin went up defiantly. Then she laughed tantalizingly, for she saw in Compton's eyes the suspicion that lay naked in them.

"So you know, eh?" she laughed, her white teeth flashing. "Well, if you know, why should you come to me? Get out of here—I hate you!"

"Sore, eh?" grinned Compton. He was flattered by this exhibition of temper; it showed that she had cared more for him than he had thought. "Well," he went on, "a man gets tired—just as I tired of you. So you told him, eh?"

It was plain to the girl that Compton meditated violence; she saw that in his eyes now, where, an instant before, she had seen only rage. Her face whitened a little as she stepped toward the dresser, where she kept a pistol of small caliber.

Compton saw the gleam of fear in her eyes and the swift pallor that came into her cheeks. And before she could reach the dresser he leaped at her, gripping her hands with a ruthless strength that made her whimper with pain.

He held her close to him, holding both her hands in one of his, while with the free hand he seized the back of her neck, the fingers biting deeply into the flesh. She cringed from the malignant fury of his eyes and opened her lips to scream.

"Scream, damn you!" he sneered. "You tell me how you warned Rand or I'll choke the life out of you!"

Awed by the blazing eyes of the man, unable to endure

the terrible pain at the back of her neck, the girl answered frenziedly:

"I rode to him that night — the night I heard you and Kinney and Webster plotting to kill him. I was behind the partition. Don't squeeze so hard, Link; you are hurting me!"

But the man's eyes were still aflame with fury, and his fingers sank deeper into her flesh. And he laughed, lowly and harshly.

"Was it because you hate me, or because you love him? Answer straight, or I'll break your neck!"

"I love him," answered the woman.

Compton laughed full-throatedly, a bitter, mirthless laugh that made the woman shiver.

"You love him, eh!" He looked at her as though about to taunt her regarding the passion to which she had confessed; then his grip tightened and his eyes grew subtle and cunning.

"Two or three times while we were on good terms, you hinted that you knew the father of that kid of Rand's. I'm wanting to know — I'm going to know, right now!"

He released her hands and slipped both his own to her throat, and despite the wild appeal in her eyes, and the staring horror in them, he pressed his thumbs into the flesh until she cried out chokingly:

"Don't; I'll tell!"

"Is it Rand?" he whispered hoarsely.

She shook her head negatively.

"Who, then?"

"Amos Seddon," she whispered gaspingly. Then she reeled backward and staggered to a chair, into which she fell, both hands at her throat; while Compton, with wide, incredulous gaze, watched her.

"You lying?" he said, stepping toward her and standing over her threateningly.

Again she made a negative motion with her head, and Compton backed away, laughing derisively.

"The old son-of-a-gun!" he said. He again approached the girl, grinning down at her hugely.

"So that's the reason Seddon doesn't like Rand, eh? Rand knows, does he?" he asked the girl.

The girl nodded affirmatively.

For a time Compton stood and watched her, a gleam of malicious cunning in his smiling eyes.

Yesterday, in the rear room downstairs, when Rand had entered while Kinney's injured hand was being cared for, Compton had caught the glances exchanged by Rand and Lucia Morell. And during the time that Rand had been in the room, Compton had observed the admiration and applause in the girl's eyes.

But it had not been until he had been riding toward town earlier in the day that he had thought to associate

the girl with the incident of the shooting. And then, remembering her glance at Rand, he had decided it had been she who had warned Rand.

He had entered her room, determined to inflict physical punishment upon her; but the revelation of Seddon's secret, and the discovery that the girl was in love with Rand, offered possibilities that would be more satisfying than physical punishment inflicted upon the girl who cringed in the chair near him.

He laughed, lowly and placatively, as he watched Lucia; and when he walked toward her and stood looking down at her, the passion had gone out of his eyes.

"I didn't intend to hurt you, Lucia." He drew a chair near her and seated himself on its edge. "You see, I lost my temper. I didn't know you loved Rand; I thought you had warned him because you hated me."

Disregarding the resentful fury of the girl's eyes, he resumed, smiling smoothly.

"I know you'd like to murder me, but I won't let you. Let's talk sense and face the facts. You love Rand, and with a woman of your type, to love a man is to try to get him. Has it ever occurred to you that Rand is a handsome devil, and that there might be another woman, besides yourself, who wants him?"

He regarded her keenly, and his lips curved with a smile of satisfaction when he saw her start and stiffen.

He knew the woman's nature; he was aware of the passionate impulses that ruled her; and he saw the wanton gleam in her eyes as she returned his gaze.

She was thinking of Rand; of his manner on the night she had warned him of the plot to kill him; of how he had held her off, refusing her advances. She had thought, then, that there might be another woman, but she could think of no one in Ocate who might be a possible rival. For Rand, until now, had not been interested in women — of her type, at least.

And so, despite her resentment for the big, smiling, ruthless man, she could not hide her curiosity and interest.

"Who is she?" she demanded, her dark eyes glowing with sudden passion.

"That's better," mocked Compton. "The thought that there might be another woman is intolerable, isn't it?"

"Bah!" she scoffed; "don't try to be humorous, Link; it doesn't become you. Especially at this minute, when you've choked me, and you are insanely jealous of Rand. Ha, ha!" she laughed when she saw Compton's face turn crimson and noted the leaping fire in his eyes. "The thought that there might be another *man* is intolerable, too, eh?"

He cursed, and sat looking at her vindictively; and the woman, watching him with implacable, hating gaze, smiled sneeringly, wisdom in her eyes.

"Everybody knows you hate Rand, and everybody knows Rand hates you. That's notorious. And everybody knows that if both of you stay in this country long enough, your hatred for each other will end in a killing. It would have ended that way before now, if Rand was as bloodthirsty as you. And it's coming now; any fool can see that. And *you* are hurrying it. And I know why. It's because you and Rand love the same woman. Who is she, Link?" she taunted, watching him with level gaze.

"It's Eleanor Seddon!" snapped Compton, his eyes gleaming balefully as they met those of the woman.

Lucia drew a long breath and leaned back in the chair. For a long time she sat motionless and thoughtful, her eyes smoldering with a fire that fascinated Compton, so deep and wanton was it. And at last, with a shallow grin at him, she said lowly:

"It looks as though our interests are going to jibe, after all, doesn't it, Link?"

And then, for half an hour, they talked. The woman was no longer resentful, and Compton taunted her no more. And when Compton departed he was wearing an evil, satisfied grin; while the woman, left alone, sat for some time in the chair, smiling mirthlessly.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE RIDDLE OF RAND

MIDNIGHT and Silver had no hard task upon the day Bud sat on the porch watching them as they loped toward the river, beyond which was the big stretch of timber, for their riders seemed to be in no hurry. Therefore the two horses, nosing each other companionably, made their way leisurely into the smiling sunshine, contented with the small demands made upon them.

At the shallow crossing of the river, Miss Seddon pulled Silver up and looked at Rand with a slightly troubled expression in her eyes.

"Water is getting scarce in this section, isn't it?" she inquired. The girl had in mind her father's charge that Rand was "stingy" with the water, and she wanted to see Rand's face when she spoke of it. And so she turned to look at him.

He met her gaze steadily. "Why, I reckon there's enough water. Only," he added, smiling faintly, "it ain't scattered around as it might be. Your dad didn't have much last season. His stock was lookin' pretty bad, an' Larry Redfern rode over an' told him to drive to the shallow here to water."

"Who is Larry Redfern?"

"My range boss."

Her eyes quickened as she looked at him. "Larry Redfern rode over, you said. But of course Redfern had to have some authority to make the offer; he could not have made it on his own responsibility!"

"I expect he had authority," said Rand, looking downward and smoothing Midnight's mane.

"Whose?" she demanded.

"Why, mine, ma'am," he grinned; "was you expectin' Larry has more than one boss?"

"Why didn't you say it was you at the start?" she demanded.

He looked up and his eyes, gleaming serenely, met hers.

"I'd heard that Compton an' your dad was complainin' that I was stingy with the water. Larry an' me was talkin' it over one day, an' Larry suggested we ought to let your dad's cattle water here. An' so Larry rode over an' told your dad."

"And Compton?"

"Compton didn't get any invitation."

"Why?"

She saw his eyes gleam with some strong passion. But only for an instant. In the next he was smiling mirthlessly at Midnight's mane, where he patted it.

She felt the constraint that had come into his manner;

and she divined that all was not well between him and Compton. Seddon had not told her that Compton was implicated in the shooting in town, and so she had no foundation upon which to build a structure of speculation; though a certain hard expression that had come into Rand's face indicated much.

But if she expected him to explain his attitude toward Compton she was doomed to disappointment, for while she waited, expectantly, he looked up, grinning gravely.

"Why, I reckon we must have plumb forgot him!"

She remembered that on the day of her meeting with Compton—just after she had fled from the Three Bar on the day Rand had shown her a picture of his father—she had spoken to Compton of Rand, and she had a vivid recollection of Compton's manner at the time—and of his words: "I am glad that your adventure didn't turn out to be any worse than it did."

That speech indicated bitterness toward Rand; and the passion he had betrayed when she had mentioned having been in the timber with Rand, coupled with Rand's manner at this moment, convinced her that between the two men was a mutual dislike at the least.

However, looking sharply at Rand, she decided that of the two he was the stronger character. For had she not been watching him closely a moment ago she would not have detected the passion in his eyes; he had sternly

repressed it, and he had not been eager to defame Compton — whereas Compton, in her talk with him, had permitted her to see his hatred of the other — it had suffused his face; his eyes had been malignant with it.

As a matter of fact, Compton's manner that day had prejudiced her against him. She had felt the magnetism of him; she had sensed his intense virility; and she had been aware that his face was darkly handsome.

If she had merely to deal with exteriors she might have been more deeply impressed. But back of the girl's clear eyes was an active brain possessed of a judgment of human values that might have disconcerted Compton, had he known of it.

For she had seen beyond Compton's surface attractions. She had seen the ruthlessness in his eyes; she had noted the flaming desire in them. She had seen the egotism and the complacent and smug self-satisfaction of him. And she had known — at the first look at him — that he expected to achieve an easy victory over her — that he had been easily victorious over many women.

However, she had *felt* the lure of him — that was sex, which no brain controls; and the danger that lay in her meeting him often was in the chance that sex, thrilled by his magnetism, would not be governed by the cold calm of reason. Therefore she feared him.

She did not fear Rand. Not even when he had shown

her the picture of his father had she feared him; she had been merely startled over the thought that unknowingly she had gone into the house with a man whom her father had condemned.

Rand's personality, too, had attracted her. And she saw beneath *his* surface attractions also. Rand was good-looking — better looking than Compton, in her estimation, for his features were stronger. Besides, when she looked beyond them at the inner man she felt the sturdy manliness of him, the ruggedness of his morals, the quiet force that radiated from him.

Upon only one point was she uncertain. That was concerning his moods. It was a thing that had baffled her that morning when he had been talking with her outside the ranchhouse just before he had shot her father's pipe out of his hand. She was baffled now, as they urged their horses on toward the timber.

The knowledge irritated her — in much the same manner that he had irritated her on the day of their first meeting — when she had mistaken him for one of the Bar S men. Never had she met a more contradictory character, nor one that interested her more than Rand interested her.

And yet he puzzled her. In his present mood he was gentle, grave and winning; and the slow humor in his eyes aroused her to a responsive emotion. At the same

time, it provoked her to a smoldering indignation—for it seemed to suggest the presence of a subtleness in him belied by the sternness of his face.

Contrasting his present mood with that other—the one she had seen him in when he had faced her father after the pipe-shooting incident—she discovered that there seemed to be no mental balance in which to weigh him. In that other mood his eyes, his face, his manner had reflected a hard, unyielding spirit—something savage and sinister and intolerant, a passionate intensity, an elemental brutality that had frightened her.

And she vacillated between two opinions; a grave question perplexed her; was he ruled by those dark passions she had seen slumbering in his eyes upon the day of the pipe-shooting incident, or did the lighter and gentler mood shape his attitude toward his fellows?

Men, of course, were always at their best when in the presence of women who interested them; she knew that. But he had shown her two moods, and it remained for her to judge him. And she could not judge.

Nor could she reach a conclusion after having explored the timber with him. For during the ride his mood did not change; he was gravely polite, considerate, and gentlemanly.

However, she was strangely attracted to him, and she found herself hoping that the gentleness she had seen in

him would prove to be the rule by which she must judge the man.

She came to see Bud the next day, and the next; and for many days following she managed to spend some time at the Three Bar.

Not always was Rand there to greet her. And during his absences she talked much with Aunt Betsey and Uncle Ephraim, to discover that the affection of the two for Rand was equaled only by the enthusiastic devotion of Bud.

Also, Aunt Betsey took her through the house, even into Rand's room, where the girl saw the picture of his mother on the wall. Eleanor stood long before the picture, studying the serenely smiling eyes that regarded her so steadily — eloquent, honest eyes that reflected the good that must have dwelt in the heart of their owner all the days of her life.

Also, looking keenly at the picture, Eleanor saw far back in the eyes a certain wistfulness and sadness; and she wondered if, when the picture was taken, the woman might not have been thinking of the man whose photograph hung on the wall in another room — Rand's father; the outlaw whose cruel, brooding face revealed evidence of those savage passions she had seen reflected in the eyes of the son.

CHAPTER XIX

COMPTON PLOTS

TWICE during the week that followed the talk between Link Compton and Lucia Morell in the girl's room above the Gilt Edge saloon, Compton rode over to the Bar S. Each time he found Eleanor Seddon absent from the ranchhouse, and each time Compton's face darkened with passion.

From the Mexican woman who had been Seddon's housekeeper since the death of Seddon's wife Compton learned that Eleanor was seldom at the ranchhouse during the day.

Nor did Compton gain any consolation from the Mexican woman's manner. She disliked the big man—for Compton's attitude toward her had always been that of contemptuous insolence—and she looked at him maliciously as, on his second visit within a few days, he stood at the edge of the porch, frowning, having just been told by the woman that Eleanor had gone away.

"Where did she go?" he demanded, scowling at the woman.

The woman smiled silkily, her voice soft-toned and apologetic. "She's ride theeze way—on the Silver

horse." She pointed toward the trail that led to the Three Bar, and Compton's gaze grew malignant.

"Does she go that way every day?"

"Ever' day," smiled the woman, veiling her dislike of the man with her smooth smile.

"How long does she stay?"

"How long?" The woman smiled broadly and knowingly, and held up a hand, the fingers spread wide. "She's stay theezee many hours—always. More—sometimes. Most always she come home with the dark." Her smile broadened as she launched a subtle shaft at Compton. "Rand is a nize man—you think?"

Compton sneered silently at her, leaped on his horse, and rode away, riding rigid in the saddle—betraying his rage; while the woman, watching him, grimaced at his back.

Compton had not been surprised to discover that Eleanor Seddon was visiting the Three Bar. In fact, he had expected the girl to be interested in Rand. For upon the day she had told him of her meeting with Rand in the timber, he had not failed to note the glow in her eyes when she had spoken of Rand; and though he knew that much of the girl's praise was sheer coquetry—with some perverseness, aroused by the jealousy *he* must have exhibited—he had been aware that she had felt a deep interest in the man.

For Rand was a man who attracted the interest of every woman who saw him. The man's strong face; the cold confidence that he exuded; the brooding, passionate gleam of his eyes—all those unusual and visible signs of character could not fail to intrigue a woman's curiosity.

They had even impressed Compton! For despite his hatred of the man, Compton recognized him as a worthy antagonist. And beneath Compton's hatred was a respect—vague and reluctant, but undoubtedly sincere.

With jealousy raging within him—his face hideous with the reflection of it—Compton followed the trail taken by Rand on the morning the latter had ridden to Ocate to meet Kinney.

Compton's reflections were as bitter as the expression on his face. For he felt that Rand was an interloper.

During the three years that he had owned the Two Link, Compton had listened to Seddon's praises of his daughter until he had felt that he knew the girl. And Seddon had given him the girl's photograph.

Compton had studied the picture until the desire to possess her had grown acute, a passion that had laid its gripping yearning upon his soul. And on the day, sitting in the chair on the porch of the Bar S ranchhouse, he had seen her riding toward him, he had felt that he had known her during the years of her absence from the Bar S.

But even before her home-coming he had been jealous

of Rand. He had been afraid of Rand, afraid that when Eleanor saw the Three Bar man there would be little chance for himself. That jealousy was what had made him hate Rand at first sight; it was his jealousy which had made him continue to hate the man; it was that passion which had made him so eager to bring about Rand's death through the instrumentality of Kinney, the gun-fighter; the same passion had led him to spread the story which had linked Rand's name to the robberies and the cattle-rustling incidents which had occurred within the past two or three years.

And the thing he had feared had come to pass—Eleanor Seddon was interested in Rand. And Rand had succeeded in escaping the meshes of every plot that had been laid to trap him.

Compton rode through the immense basin in which Rand had come upon Larry Redfern. Compton knew the Three Bar outfit was in the basin with the Three Bar cattle, for he had seen men and cattle from the edge of the mesa from which Rand had viewed them on the morning he had gone to town to meet Kinney.

Compton, however, had no intention of conversing with the Three Bar men, for he hated them all with something of the same fervor with which he hated their employer. But when, traveling the trail that wound its way through the basin, he came upon Larry Redfern, riding toward

him, on his way to join some of the Three Bar men far out in the basin, he returned Larry's grinning nod with a curt wave of the hand.

He was about to ride on, and was passing within a dozen feet of Larry when, noting the scowl on Compton's face, and yielding to one of those jocose impulses which sometimes moved him, Larry spoke :

"I reckon the Bar S is gettin' a heap popular."

Compton halted his horse and wheeled it, facing Larry. The rage which had seethed in Compton's veins since leaving the Bar S was in his eyes as he looked at Larry; a pallid sneer was wreathing his face; his voice was dry and light and venomous.

"Just what are you getting at, Redfern?" he asked slowly.

There was a grin on Larry's face. At first it had been an amused grin, now it was mirthless. For he saw in Compton's eyes the terrible rage that had gripped the man; he saw that his joking words had aroused Compton to a bitter frenzy.

And yet in Larry's eyes was no fear. He ceased to grin, but in his eyes, as they met and held Compton's, was a glint of knowledge, an alertness, and a humorous malice.

"I'm meanin' there's a heap of suitors clutterin' up the Bar S trail. I'm thinkin' of gettin' into the game myself."

"Fresh, eh?" said Compton sneeringly. He pulled his

horse around so that his right side was hidden from Larry, so that the Three Bar man could not see his right hand, lingering close to the butt of his pistol.

But Larry did not need to see those things; he saw the light in Compton's eyes, and his own chilled, as with a lightning movement he drew his six-shooter and rested it on the pommel of his saddle, its muzzle frowning at Compton.

"Riled, eh?" mocked Larry; "meditatin' real venomous, you was, you locoed rummy! You're thinkin' I was born yesterday, eh—a flea-bitten pup!

"Your guessin' is plumb ridiculous! You don't reckon I'm goin' to let no sneakin' coyote like you shoot me? There's one thing I always do when I run across a poison sneak like you, an' that's to start gettin' ready a heap early!

"An' now I'm continuin' my remarks about the Bar S. I'm takin' back what I said about it bein' popular—for you. It ain't. Rand's got you coppered to lose. An' Miss Seddon ain't home to you." He grinned hugely. "She ain't home to nobody—looks like. For nearly every day I see her scuffin' up the top of that ridge above the river, hittin' the trail to the Three Bar. That's what's botherin' you, eh?" he added as Compton's lips went into a sullen pout.

"Well, you an' Rand fight it out; an' don't you go to

resentin' my sweet words on the subject, an' tryin' to sling your gun on me when I ain't expectin' it, or I'll sure bust you some! You mosey, now, before I get my temper mixed up with the trigger of this gun! Git, you coyote!"

Compton wheeled his horse and rode onward, not looking back.

When he reached the edge of the mesa he halted to breathe his horse, and saw, far back on the floor of the basin, Larry still sitting on his horse, watching.

Compton rode into Ocate, dismounting in front of the sheriff's office. Later, he talked with Webster, and still later he strode down the street to the Gilt Edge. The bitter mood still enduring, he drank much at the bar, and later played cards with some of his friends in the rear room. And about midnight he had another talk with Lucia Morell.

Early the next morning he rode northward, accompanied by Kinney, whose hand was healing rapidly.

The Two Link ranch was several miles northeastward from town; and the morning was still young when Compton and Kinney rode up to the gate of the horse corral and dismounted.

Several men who were draped on benches in front of the bunkhouse watched the approach of Compton and Kinney with interested glances. And as Compton dismounted and came toward them, Kinney closely follow-

ing, the men whispered to one another. One of them laughed lowly. All watched Kinney with an intentness which indicated much speculation.

There were six of the men — evil-eyed, reckless-looking fellows, bepistoled, spurred, and attired in rigging that was rather more picturesque than that affected by other range men of their kind — and when Kinney came close to them he felt that between them and himself was a kindred spirit. He grinned widely, and the smiles that answered his effort were as significant of knowledge as his own.

"This is Slim Kinney, boys," was Compton's presentation of his companion. "He's one of the gang, now." He grinned with cold mirth at the men. "I suppose 'Lefty' Morgan told you about that gun fracas Kinney had with Rand in town. Well," and he fixed them all with a sardonic glance, "don't go to razzing Kinney about him freezing like a statue and getting his finger busted. There ain't a damned one of you got nerve enough to run in with Rand. And so you don't need to josh Kinney about anything."

Noting that the men flushed at his reference to Rand, Compton laughed lowly. "It's hell when a man who has never plugged a man for keeps can bluff a whole damned outfit, ain't it?"

There was no answer, and Compton fixed his gaze upon

a tall man with a truculent eye, who sat a little apart from the others.

"Nothing new?" he inquired.

"Nope," said the other; "we was waitin' for you to show up." He grinned, one corner of his mouth drooping with extravagant nonchalance.

"We got a bunch of mavericks holed up in Red Rock basin. We ain't aimin' to run them north until you give the word."

"Whose stock?"

"Miller's, I reckon—mebbe some of Hiller's, from over the Divide."

"How many?"

"Hundred an' seventy-nine—strict count."

"Run them north tonight," directed Compton. "There won't be any moon. Take the east trail—that will take you past Hiller's far enough away so that his boys won't be able to see you if they're working the east basin."

"Correct," said the man. He rolled a cigarette, and while lighting it winked solemnly at the other men, Compton watching him. When he was sure Compton's gaze was upon him, and that Compton was expecting further speech from him, he said, slowly, as though speaking to the men at whom he was winking:

"Runnin' trail of nights is gittin' a heap monotonous. No excitement—no nothin'. If there was anybody

around here could tell a man about when the stage company is figurin' to drag a load of dust through—that man would sure be listened to a whole lot eager. You don't happen to know a guy like that—do you, you grinnin' coyotes!"

Compton laughed. "You're wanting to take things too easy, Carter. That last haul we made has got you greedy."

"There's a lot more of the boys wettin' their lips over the notion, too," grinned Carter.

"Well," said Compton; "we'll know it when they ship some more. Val Davis ain't letting anything get away from him." He walked to the door of the bunkhouse and peered inside. Then he again turned to Carter.

"Where's Lefty Morgan?"

"Morgan ain't showin' hisself much these days," answered Carter. "He's spendin' a heap of his time gallivantin' around the country on that big black hoss of his'n. I was down in the east cañon the other day, lookin' up strays. I rode roundabout, hittin' the big slope leadin' up to the level near the Three Bar ranchhouse; an' I seen a guy on a black hoss headin' toward me. I sure thought it was Beau Rand, an' I was gettin' ready to slope—when I took another peep an' seen it was Lefty Morgan on his black. That black sure looks enough like Rand's Mid-night hoss to *be* him!"

Compton's eyes glowed; but he did not answer. Instead, he wheeled, told Kinney he wanted to talk with him, and followed by the gunfighter, he walked to the ranchhouse.

Carter grinned at Kinney's back. "That guy, Rand, now," he said to the others; "he's sure got 'em all fussed up! There's guys which is yappin' that Rand ain't got nerve enough to wipe a man out; but you notice none of the guys that's doin' the yappin' is runnin' in with Rand. There's somethin' about Rand that makes me meek for fair when I meets up with him!"

"Link will bust him wide open, some of these days!" growled a man near Carter.

"Well," grinned Carter; "he won't be askin' Slim Kinney how to do it, I reckon!"

It was later the next afternoon when Lefty Morgan, the Two Link range boss, rode up to the ranchhouse and slipped from his black horse. Compton met him on the porch.

"Well?" interrogated Compton.

Morgan, who was a short man with an energetic air and a squinting, quizzical eye, grinned faintly.

"He's sure a Simon-pure lover!" he said. "An' she sizes up plenty eager to have him. I watched them—as you told me; an I'm that used to crawlin' on my belly in the brush that there's times when I'm certain I'm a locoed side-winder. Anyhow, they've got thick. At first she

held off quite considerable — him not makin' no progress. But within the last day or so, she's give in. An' this afternoon I seen them settin' close together on a log in the timber — Rand holdin' her hand an' speakin' gentle to her. What he was tellin' her must have tickled her a heap, for she was blushin' prodigious, an' not sayin' anything."

"That's all," said Compton, shortly.

CHAPTER XX

“LIARS — AND LIARS”

ELEANOR SEDDON had been making progress with Bud, and upon the day Morgan made his report to Compton, she had ridden to the Three Bar again.

Certain thoughts had troubled the lady today as she rode toward the Three Bar. Of late she had been aware of an eagerness that had seized her each morning when she had awakened in her room at the Bar S. That there was an attraction for her at the Three Bar, she knew, but until this morning she could not have told whether the attraction was Bud or the grave-faced man who had transferred the responsibility of Bud's training to her. But on this morning she had mercilessly applied the probe of self-analysis, and she had blushed many times during the ride.

For upon her — as a result of the analysis — had grown the conviction that Rand was the magnet that attracted her. To be sure, she loved Bud, and she had a sincere desire to direct his youthful thoughts into less profane channels; but she could no longer deny that upon those days when Rand absented himself — or when he was not at the Three Bar to greet her — she was afflicted with a

regret that almost took the pleasure out of her teaching of Bud.

She knew she had been reluctant to admit the existence of that regret; but upon this morning she found herself hoping Rand would be at the Three Bar when she arrived—and then quite suddenly she realized that the Three Bar lacked something when Rand was absent.

It was a disturbing conviction, and upon this morning—when she admitted its existence—she blushed furiously. But she rode on, her eyes brighter than usual, as, nearing the ranchhouse, she scanned the buildings and the surrounding country.

But it was Bud and Aunt Betsey who greeted her when she dismounted near the front door; and for a time, as she sat on the porch talking with Aunt Betsey, she concealed her curiosity regarding Rand.

It was Aunt Betsey who told her that Rand had ridden to the big basin to see Larry Redfern. Likewise, it was Aunt Betsey who detected the gleam of disappointment in Eleanor's eyes when the information had been given.

And later, when Aunt Betsey went into the house, leaving Bud and Eleanor together on the porch, the good lady lingered for an instant near Uncle Ephraim, in the kitchen, smiling contentedly.

Uncle Ephraim threw a furtive glance over the rims of his glasses and noted the smile of his better half.

“Somethin’ ticklin’ you, I reckon?” he inquired insinuatingly.

Aunt Betsey laughed tremulously, and whispered into Ephraim’s ear.

That gentleman sat erect, looking at her with wide-open mouth.

“You don’t say!” he gasped.

“Eph!” she declared. “She’s goin’ to love him!”

Uncle Ephraim’s eyes brightened. It was not a gleam of disbelief that came into them; it was a light that reflected a desire to be completely assured.

“Shucks,” he grunted; “how do *you* know?”

She smiled gently. “I’ve got eyes, ain’t I? An’ there’s signs. Eph,” she added, mischievously; “I hate to admit it, but that Seddon girl acts toward Beaudry just like I used to *feel* toward you. When Beaudry’s around her she’s always watchin’ him when he ain’t lookin’ at her — with a kind of yearnin’ which is somethin’ like the way a mother looks at a child; an’ when he ain’t around she looks plumb disappointed. An’ twice, after I told her Beaudry’d gone to the big basin, she sighed.”

Uncle Ephraim settled back into his chair, clearing his throat.

“Well,” he said loyally; “she might do a heap worse. Beaudry’s a chunk of dynamite which the right woman could mold into a hunk of putty, I reckon.”

Unaware of the fact that the old people were discussing her, but feeling just a trifle lonesome despite the presence of Bud, Eleanor looked at her pupil with steady, counterfeited sternness.

"Bud," she said slowly; "you don't call the sorrel horse names any more—do you?"

"No!" declared Bud.

"You don't—er—'cuss' any more at all?"

"It ain't nice to cuss."

"That's true. No really intelligent person—that is, no smart man, or woman"—she added, when she observed that Bud did not comprehend the "intelligent"—"cusses the things God has made. And God made everything that walks, runs, swims, or flies—horses, cows, dogs, birds, men, women, boys, and girls—everything. And it is silly to cuss at things that can't hear you—things like a chair, for instance, or a rock that you stub your toe on—or anything like that."

"I know it," said Bud positively; "you told me that before."

Bud sat there long without speaking; he seemed to be gravely meditating. And, having other thoughts just at that moment—thoughts that centered upon a certain rider who was to visit a certain basin—Miss Seddon almost forgot Bud.

Trouble was swimming in Bud's eyes; his little fore-

head grew wrinkled with it; his lips stuck out in a sullen pout as he watched Miss Seddon. Miss Seddon was reminded of his presence when she heard him say belligerently:

"My dad is a smart man!"

The lady started and looked at Bud, to see a truculent glare in his eyes.

"My dad is a smart man!" repeated Bud, with emphasis.

"Why, of course!" said the lady, wondering.

This was a concession, and Bud looked triumphant. And his voice was triumphant as he added:

"An' my dad cusses, too — an' he's smart!"

Miss Seddon sat erect, and a stain appeared in each of her cheeks. She leaned forward.

"Bud!" she said reprovingly. "He doesn't!"

"He does!" declared Bud, with a vehemence that equaled the lady's. "He cusses — lots. He cusses the sorrel horse; he cusses the saddle — when he puts it on!"

"Bud," said the lady, her voice very low and solemn — so that Bud scented wickedness in the air — "Bud," she repeated slowly; "your dad doesn't cuss in your presence? That is — he doesn't cuss where you can hear him?"

"My dad's smart — an' he cusses every day!" declared Bud. "He cussed this mornin' before he went away. I heard him. He put me on the gatepost an' cussed the

sorrel horse, an' the gate, an' the basin. I'll tell you what he said," Bud offered generously; "he said——"

"Sh!" cautioned the lady; "don't say it!"

"Then I won't!" said Bud, with a quick look at her.

For a time Bud was very quiet. He was thinking, and his thoughts were vague and far, and yet they took coherent shape after a while. He dimly felt that if swearing always brought a lovely lady to remonstrate with one, why, there was some virtue in swearing, after all. And he wondered if that was why Rand swore—to bring the lady to his side.

Bud became aware that the lady had come very close to him. He felt her hand on his head, and her breath stirring his hair. And then her cheek was snuggled against his.

And then came her voice, low and soft—like a whispering breeze:

"Bud," it said; "tell me what dad said about the basin."

"Sure!" he vowed, reckless with the intoxication of her presence; "I'll tell you *everything* he said *anything* about! I'll tell you——"

"Just about the basin, Bud!"

"He said——" and Bud paused, for he wanted to be certain the lady wished him to repeat the words.

"Yes?" she whispered, encouragingly.

"He said: 'Damn the basin! And damn Larry Red-

fern! Don't the damn fool know Miss Seddon is comin' this mornin'?"

The lady emitted a pleased gasp, which sounded very much like a laugh. And, gathering courage, Bud searched his memory for more profanity.

"Bud!" The lady's voice broke in on his thoughts.

"Yes."

"Your dad didn't always cuss?"

"No."

"When did you hear him, first — when did he begin to swear?" Her cheek was pressed tightly to his. "Think hard, Bud!" she encouraged.

"He cussed one night, an' you come the next day."

"What did he cuss, Bud?"

"The sorrel horse."

"Bud?"

"Yes."

"Did he keep on cussing after — after I came?"

"Yes — he cusses all the time."

The lady hid her head on Bud's shoulder, and her body moved with convulsive motions singularly like those which had agitated his father's shoulders on the night Bud had heard him cuss the first time.

But presently she raised her head, and Bud observed that her face was radiant, and that her eyes were shining with a soft brilliance.

"Bud," she said; "promise me that you will never, never cuss again! For," she added, smiling, "your dad is going to promise me the same thing!"

"Dad will be smart, then?"

"Oh!" she laughed. "Dad is smart, now — almost too smart!"

And then she put him down and told him to "run" in to Aunt Betsey. When he vanished through the doorway she descended the steps and walked to a corner of the pasture fence, where she stood for a long time with a glow in her eyes that would have caused Bud to wonder much — had he been there to see it.

It was not very many minutes later that Eleanor heard a sound behind her. She turned, to see Rand, on Midnight, within a dozen feet of her. There was a pleased grin on Rand's face — and Midnight looked moist — as though he had run far and fast.

The girl tried hard to keep the leap out of her voice; but she knew he detected it, for she saw his eyes widen.

"Why," she said. "Bud told me you had gone to the basin, to meet Larry Redfern!"

"I met him comin' here," he grinned. "Larry's accommodatin'. Almost too accommodatin'," he added, the grin fading and a frown succeeding it. "For you see, ma'am; I lit out early, intendin' to be away so's I wouldn't be interferin' with Bud's education."

"How considerate you are!" she said, in a voice that made him look intently at her. "You don't mean to tell me that you *deliberately* left Bud to me?"

"I thought you could take care of him."

"So I can. And so you *wanted* to go to the basin?"

Again he looked intently at her — and this time he saw the guile in her eyes. His face reddened.

"Well, I don't reckon I wanted to go *awful* bad. It was thinkin' you'd have a hard time with Bud that sent me. But now that I'm back I'd like it mighty well if you'd go ridin' with me."

"And neglect Bud?"

"There's Aunt Betsey."

"And not do anything with his education today?"

"Shucks! I expect he ain't in a powerful hurry to be educated, ma'am — no boy is."

"Well," she said, noting his earnestness; "I shall go with you — this time."

She got on Silver, and together they rode over the shallow water of the river toward the timber.

And it was not until they reached the fallen log — where Lefty Morgan had seen them — that Miss Seddon again referred to Bud; though they had talked gaily on indifferent subjects during the ride.

Rand had taken her to a section of the timber which she never had visited — the northern section, where a

big tableland behind them frowned above the tree tops — and Miss Seddon insisted on exploring the place.

A fallen log — the trunk of a mighty giant which had yielded to the ravages of age; its branches and limbs stripped of their green foliage — reminded Miss Seddon of the spot where Rand had killed the wolf upon a day that was still vivid in her recollection.

A malicious impulse seized the girl as she walked to the log and seated herself upon it — Rand standing at a little distance, watching her.

"Swearing is a terrible habit — isn't it?" she remarked calmly.

"It sure ain't polite," returned Rand.

"But there are worse habits."

"I reckon."

"Lying, for instance," she said, fixing him with a direct, unsmiling glance. "In my opinion there is nothing so vicious as lying."

"I expect lyin' is a bad habit, ma'am," he said. His brows were drawn together; there was a perplexed light in his eyes, and he watched her narrowly, for it seemed to him that she was obliquely striking at him.

"And yet you lied to me," she said.

"Why, I reckon, ma'am," he began. And then he saw the sarcastic gleam in her eyes. He stepped forward and stood close to her. And when he saw that she was not

indignant — or that mirth was fighting with indignation for the mastery — he said, lowly and earnestly:

"Bud's been givin' me away!"

And then he turned from her — but not swiftly enough to conceal from her eyes the glee that was gleaming in his own.

She got up and turned her back to him, standing very rigid, her chin raised disdainfully. She felt that if she faced him he would see the pardon for his offense in her eyes, and she didn't want him to think that it could be so easily given.

There followed a long silence; and then she heard Rand step close to her. His voice was low and serious, and there was a vibrant appeal in it that brought a fugitive smile to her face.

"I'm beggin' your pardon," he said.

She made no answer, merely shrugging her shoulders and keeping her face averted.

He cleared his throat. Flashing a glance at him, Miss Seddon saw that he was looking downward, his chin on his chest. He was sure he had offended her beyond pardon; though in his mind at this minute was no blame for Bud — only a grim humor, and a curiosity to know what the boy had told her.

"As to Bud's cussin'—" he began, when she did not answer.

"The idea!" she interrupted. "Teaching a little boy to swear! Why did you do it?"

"Shucks!" he said; "I reckon I was sure a boxhead. But I couldn't think of any other way to get you to come over to the Three Bar——"

"For shame!"

He stepped closer to her. "I didn't teach him a whole lot of it," he said. "Between the two of us—if we go about it earnestly—we can cure him mighty rapid."

"I detest a liar," she said.

His face paled; but of course she did not see it, for she still stood with her back to him. But she heard him move, and a blush suffused her face—for she was certain he was approaching her. And she was prepared to forgive him—in fact, she had never blamed him very much.

However, he was moving away from her. She heard his step grow fainter, and the color fled from her cheeks.

"Rand."

Her voice was soft, and it brought him to a halt before he had taken half a dozen steps.

He did not speak, looking wonderingly at her back.

"Of course," came her voice again, low and gentle; "there are liars—*and* liars."

"It wasn't such an *awful* crime," he said, hopefully.

"And if," she added, not seeming to know he had

spoken; "there was a chance that a liar might reform——"

"I know *one* man who won't lie again!" he said.

"And would promise never to lie to me again——"

"I promise."

"Or teach Bud to lie——"

"I promise."

"Why, I might forgive him," she finished.

He was close to her by this time, his eyes alight with knowledge and aflame with a joy that made the girl's eyes droop when she saw them.

A little later, sitting on the fallen tree trunk — where, from his lofty concealment Lefty Morgan had seen them — Rand drew a great, long breath and patted the hand that lay so confidingly in his.

"An' you say you hearin' Bud swear wasn't what made you come to the Three Bar?" he asked — again.

"No," she smiled; "I should have come — anyway — because — because I wanted to."

He grinned — and patted the hand again.

"Well," he said, soberly; "I wasn't takin' any chances."

CHAPTER XXI

STRIKING DEEP

DUSK had fallen when Miss Seddon returned to the Bar S. Her face was flushed, and her eyes eloquent with a light that had never been in them before, when she turned Silver into the corral and carried the saddle and bridle into the lean-to near the stable, where she hung them from their accustomed peg.

She stood for a long time looking around her at the big world, enwrapped with the descending gloom, aware of a new beauty that had come into it all; her heart singing with the new-found joy that had come to her. She felt ineffably tender toward everything—and before she went to the house she walked over to the corral, called Silver to her, patted his neck—assuring him that *he* was responsible; that if he had not strayed that day when she had ridden him to the timber the first time, she would not have met Rand as she had met him—thus she might not have felt the romance that so completely surrounded him.

She went into the house after a while, to find that her father had not come in. The Mexican woman informed her that Seddon had ridden in during the afternoon, and

had left word that he would be away for the night, with the outfit.

The girl ate very little, spending much of her time at the table gazing reflectively out through a window into the growing darkness. Many times she smiled at the recollection of Rand's strategem; but most of the time she was trying to analyze the new and strange emotions that had seized her.

When she left the table she went out upon the porch, where, in a big chair, she meditated long, mentally reviewing the incidents of the day—figuratively hugging them to her and enjoying them over again. She found she could not help applauding Rand's resourcefulness.

She heard the Mexican woman washing the dishes; she saw the light in the kitchen go out, and heard the woman clumping upstairs. Still, she did not stir out of the chair. Some time later, however, peering into the plains that stretched toward town, she observed a moving blot that seemed to be coming toward her out of the starlit gloom of distance, and she got up, to watch it.

She saw, after a while, that the blot had developed into a horse and rider, and she stepped to the edge of the porch, thinking the rider might be her father.

She was not certain until the horse and rider came near the porch; and then she noted with some curiosity that the rider was a woman.

She waited, saying nothing, until the woman dismounted, trailed the reins over the animal's head, and walked forward.

There was no moon, but the countless cold stars that dotted the sky sent a flickering semilight over the doorway, enabling her to see the woman's face. And while she was intently peering at the visitor, the latter advanced to the porch edge and spoke.

"You are Eleanor Seddon?"

At Eleanor's low "Yes," the woman looked soberly at her. She was so near now that Eleanor could see her face clearly—it was white, almost pallid, and her eyes held a wistful, haunting expression.

Eleanor did not know that the pallor was artificial, and the expression of the eyes the cleverest bit of acting the woman had ever done. The girl merely divined that here was one of her sex in trouble, seeking assistance.

"I am Lucia Morell, and I have ridden from Ocate to ask you to help me."

"I'll do what I can—of course," said Eleanor. "Won't you come in?"

But Lucia had no intention of entering the house; she felt that there was less possibility of detection outside, where the light was subdued and uncertain.

"It won't take long," she said. "I am not certain that I should have bothered you. But I—I heard that you

were with him a great deal, and I thought that your influence with him might make him relent."

She bowed her head as though humiliation rested heavily upon it.

"You heard—what?" demanded Eleanor, perplexed. She had advanced a little; she stood, leaning forward slightly, uncertain whether she had heard correctly.

"That you were with him a great deal. I've seen you. Almost every day for the past week, or more. And today I was on the mesa back of the timber, and I saw him holding your hand."

"Rand?" exclaimed Eleanor, the word startled out of her.

"Yes—Rand," said the woman, with savage bitterness. She now looked up, her eyes flashing with a jealous light. And Lucia was not acting now; there was a venomous passion in her heart against this woman who had won Rand.

"You don't know him," she went on, raising her voice and moving her hands with a passionate gesture; "you are with him every day, listening to his pretty speeches, but you don't know him. You can have him, though—I don't want him. All I want is my boy!"

"Your boy?" gasped Eleanor, breathlessly. She was rigid, her hands were clenched; and a great doubt and fear clutched at her heart.

"You don't mean—" she began.

"That's exactly what I mean!" interrupted the other. "Don't tell me that you didn't know it!" she jeered, as she saw Eleanor shrink backward and grasp one of the slender porch columns. "Don't try to play innocent with me, and pretend that you didn't know. I've watched you—and you *do* know. You know Bud is mine—and Rand's—Rand's! Do you understand?"

Lucia had not meant to be so vehement; on the way over from town she had decided to appeal to the womanly instincts in Eleanor; to instill into the girl through her appeal a bitterness against Rand for deceiving her—for not telling her that he was the father of the boy.

For Lucia knew Rand had not told about the boy—she knew Rand would never tell. And so she was sure of her ground, and her manner now, with the jealousy in her heart, was convincing.

She had convinced Eleanor. The girl held tightly to the porch column, the blackness of the night swathing her—a greater blackness within her—while the coldly glittering stars above her swirled in eccentric circles.

"Wait!" she commanded sharply, interrupting Lucia, who had launched a bitter denunciation of Rand. "It isn't necessary to talk that way. If—if what you say is true, I certainly do not care to—to take Rand from you. Why—why," she went on, uncertainly, her voice qua-

vering from the intense strain she was laboring under — for she was trying to repress her emotions — she did not want the woman to see that she cared — so very much; “I assure you that I didn’t know! I shouldn’t have gone there if I had! I didn’t go there to — to see Rand. He told me — something — about the boy — that he needed instruction — training; and I went over there just to ——”

“Bah!” sneered Lucia. She laughed harshly. “So that’s the game he played on you, eh? He wanted you to teach Bud. He’s a schemer, ha, ha! He’s a beau with women — he’s well named. It’s honey — all honey with him, at first. And then the gall. That’s the way he served me! He wouldn’t look at me after Bud came. And now he won’t even let me see the boy!”

Eleanor was fighting hard for her composure. She did not think to doubt the woman’s story, for she had wondered all along about Rand’s devotion to the boy; and though she had never questioned the truth of Rand’s story about Bud, it did seem strange that Rand should have adopted a nameless boy when there were many older men in the vicinity who could have taken the child in without danger of any damage to their reputations.

But she did think at this minute of Rand’s attitude toward the boy; of the dark passions she had seen in Rand’s eyes; of the smoldering something about him that seemed

to hint of the elemental and the irresponsible. She thought of it all as she stood there, with Lucia's flashing eyes upon her—and she suddenly saw Rand as the woman wanted her to see him—as Lucia had made her see him through the power of suggestion—a smiling hypocrite, a woman-hunter; a cold-hearted sycophant, merciless—a mocker in his triumphs.

She gained control of herself presently, and looked at Lucia with the cold calm of perfect composure.

"Is that all?" she asked. "You want nothing more—that is all you wanted to see me for?"

"I want you to help me get my boy!" declared Lucia. "You can do it—while he still likes you—before he wins you. I don't care what you are to him, or what he thinks of you. I want only my boy. If you will tell him——"

Eleanor laughed mirthlessly. "Getting the boy is your affair," she said coldly. "I can only say this—that I shall never see Rand again, nor shall I ever speak to him—about anything!"

She turned, crossed the porch, and went into the house, standing for a long time just inside the door, pale and shaking. Then, without looking out into the night, she closed the door, took the lamp from the center table near her, and went upstairs, where she sat for many minutes huddled in a chair, in a dumb, agonized silence.

Outside, Lucia, smiling, sneering over her easy victory — and feeling no pangs of pity or remorse — for this was merely a game to her, in which the weak succumbed to the strong — mounted her horse and sent it toward town, there to meet Compton — who had told her he would wait for her — to tell him that victory — for himself and for her — was now within reach.

CHAPTER XXII

COMPTON SMILES

COMPTON left Ocate early the next morning and headed his horse into the vast level that stretched southward. Two Bar S men, their thoughts definitely dwelling upon "town" and its attendant pleasures, had ridden in late the night before. Compton had come upon them in the Gilt Edge, and from them he learned that Seddon was with the outfit on a branch of the Canadian.

Another Bar S man arriving in Ocate the morning before had informed Compton that Seddon was spending practically all of his time with the outfit, and it had been upon that information that Compton had acted in sending Lucia Morell to the Bar S ranchhouse, to talk with Eleanor. For Compton had not wanted Seddon to be near when Lucia visited the Bar S.

Compton smiled many times as he rode, for Lucia had told him that Eleanor seemed to be convinced of her entire truthfulness. And Compton had seen in Lucia's dark, flashing eyes a reflection of the conviction of success.

In his talks with Lucia, Compton had discovered that Lucia, Rand, and Seddon himself were the only persons

in the country who knew of Seddon's illegitimate intimacy with the dance-hall girl. And therefore there was no other proof of Bud's parentage—and even that proof was not conclusive.

For Seddon would deny responsibility in the matter—he had already denied it through his continued silence. Rand had not divulged the secret; and Compton was convinced he would not divulge it. In fact, Rand would not dare to accuse Seddon—for he had no proof except his own word—and all Ocate suspected Rand himself.

Lucia Morell's word, added to that of one or the other of the two men, would be the deciding factor in the determining of responsibility—and that was the factor upon which Compton depended.

And so, having determined to use Lucia as a lever with which to work himself into Eleanor's good graces, the big man rode confidently southward, to hunt Seddon.

He found the Bar S owner with the outfit, working a little level near a shallow river; and Seddon joined him at a little distance from the men, some of whom waved their hands at Compton.

Compton dismounted near the outfit wagon, and stood, watching Seddon's approach, smiling with humorous malice. For he remembered that on another day, when he had spoken to Seddon about Eleanor, the Bar S man had given him a short answer when he had declared his

intentions regarding the girl. Some trace of the smile was still in his eyes when Seddon reached him. Seddon saw it, and spoke gruffly :

"What's ticklin' *you* this mornin'?"

Compton did not answer; he stood regarding Seddon with his malicious smile. And now, with Seddon's gaze on him, Compton's smile grew mysterious. And then, when he saw that Seddon's face was slowly reddening, and that an angry, intolerant gleam was in his eyes, Compton laughed aloud — a sound in which there was mingled scorn and amusement.

"So that's the reason you and Rand don't hit it off, eh?" he said when he had enjoyed Seddon's mystification long enough.

The color went out of Seddon's face, and then surged back again until face and neck were crimson. Had Compton doubted Lucia's word, the spectacle of guilt that now stood before him would have been sufficient to convince him.

Seddon's eyes betrayed him; they held a furtive, guilty gleam.

"What you gettin' at?" he demanded.

Seddon's voice lacked spirit; and Compton laughed again.

"Bud —" he began. But Seddon, his face convulsed, interrupted him with :

"It's a lie—damn you! It's a lie—an infernal, sneakin' lie!"

"Bah!" said Compton, sneering. "You can't put that over—on me. Lucia Morell told me—she was at the girl's side when she died. Brace up! No one else knows it—not even Rand."

He watched Seddon as the latter walked with drooping shoulders to the wooden "chuck" box near the wagon, sat heavily down on it, and leaned forward, his chin in his hands, in an attitude of complete dejection.

Seddon's face was red and swollen from the passions that were rioting in him. He did not look at Compton, but kept repeating:

"Ellie will get to hearin' it; she'll hate me—she'll hear of it, an' she'll hate me!"

And when Compton walked toward him, grinning, halting near him, he said bitterly:

"I knowed I ought to have told her—long ago. There'd have been a chance then. Now——"

He got up, a frenzied look in his eyes, and stood rigid, his muscles straining, rage paling his face.

"Damn Lucia Morell! An' damn Rand—damn all of them! I'm goin' right home an' tell Ellie before any of the sneakin' skunks can get a chance to poison her against me. I'm goin'——"

"Sit down, you fool!"

Compton gripped his shoulders with a strength that made Seddon cringe; and as he was forced down upon the chuck box he seemed to yield to the compelling spirit of the big man. For again his shoulders drooped, and he became silent, staring moodily at the dust at his feet.

Compton laughed, his voice vibrating with scorn.

"You'd tell her, eh? You'd ride right over and put her wise to what a sneak you've been—and hurt her so that she'd never look at you again! Bah! What good would that do? I'll take care of this; you keep your mouth shut!

"Look here," he went on, as Seddon began to regain his composure. "I've got this thing all framed up. Last night Lucia Morell told your daughter that Bud is Rand's boy—and that she—Lucia—is the boy's mother. Understand? Well, all you've got to do is to sit tight, and Eleanor will go on believing what Lucia told her. That's simple enough, eh?"

Compton laughed as Seddon got to his feet again, pale and relieved.

"I sure thought I'd got to the end of my string," he said. And then he looked at Compton, suspicion in his eyes.

"What you expectin' to get out of this? What did you frame it up for?"

"For Eleanor," declared the big man, with a level,

sober glance at the other. "I want her, and I'm going to have her!"

"She's been running over to the Three Bar every day for more than a week—staying until dark, or after. Rand has got her going—she's dead in love with him. I've had Lefty Morgan watching them for a week; and yesterday he saw them alone in the timber—Rand holding her hand and trying to mush with her.

"Don't think I don't know what has happened. You didn't give Rand that bill of sale for Midnight on your own hook; he made you give it to him. Why? Because you were afraid he would squeal about the boy. I didn't know why you had given it to him until Lucia Morell told me what was what. But I know now! And Rand doesn't get Eleanor. Understand? I'll see to that. You stick to Lucia's story—if it comes to a show-down—or if Eleanor asks you. If you don't I'll have Lucia tell a new story to Eleanor—and it will be the truth—don't forget that!"

Seddon stood, clenching and unclenching his hands, his face crimson again.

"Compton," he said thickly, looking intensely at the big man, "you don't mean any harm to Ellie?"

"Bah!" laughed the other. "I want to marry her, that's all—if you call that 'harm'."

Compton got on his horse and rode away, heading

straight for the Bar S. And with him he carried Seddon's permission to play the suitor to his daughter—if she would permit. And on the big man's face as he rode was a smile of triumph; for now he was certain there was no possibility of defeat for him.

CHAPTER XXIII

A NEW RIDING COMPANION

ELEANOR SEDDON was alone on the porch of the Bar S ranchhouse; she had been alone nearly all morning—except when the Mexican woman came to the front door and stood for a long time peering out, studying the girl's face. The Mexican woman wondered why Eleanor did not ride northward today—as she had been in the habit of doing.

And Silver, in the corral, eager for the daily gallop over the river trail, looked many times toward the ranchhouse during the morning, whinnying his impatience.

But Eleanor, unconscious of the concern of her friends, sat in a chair and stared with dulled eyes out into the vacant world.

She started, and sighed with relief when, late in the morning, she glanced westward and saw Link Compton coming. But her face was very pale and her lips were set tightly when she greeted the man; for when she had become convinced that the rider really was Compton, she had decided to question him about Lucia Morell and Rand. For during the night she had seized upon the only

hope that presented itself to her — the hope that Lucia Morell had lied.

To be sure, she divined that there was a certain enmity between Rand and Compton, but she reflected that no man — unless he were an unprincipled scoundrel — would lie to a woman upon so grave a matter; and though she had seen in Compton signs of a rather heavy sensuousness, she was convinced that even he would be fair to his enemy.

And upon this day Compton was at his best. The smile on his face was genial when he dismounted near the porch; there was a gleam of sincere admiration in his eyes as he looked at Eleanor after taking the chair she offered; and there was a deference in his manner, a studied politeness, which almost convinced her that on that other day she had judged him too harshly.

"I was here the other day," he said, smiling at her; "but you were away — riding. And so I came again, hoping for better luck."

"You came from the west," she said; "did you see father?"

"Yes," he returned, "I was abroad early this morning, for I had to see your father on some business connected with the vigilance committee. Some more of my cattle were stolen the other night — and something must be done."

He had noted the pallor of her face, and his thoughts had run humorously to Lucia's visit — and before him, in the ghastly paleness of Eleanor's face, was the evidence of that visit. And he had told the lie about the cattle merely for the purpose of inducing her to talk about Rand — he wanted to discover how badly Lucia's story had hurt her.

Eleanor, too, had desired the talk about Rand, and Compton's speech gave her the opportunity she had meant to contrive. Somehow it seemed to her that he would mention Rand; and so, when she slowly inquired: "Whom do you suspect?" and Compton answered shortly: "Rand," she was not surprised. And looking keenly at her, Compton marveled at her composure.

"What makes you think Rand stole the cattle?" she inquired.

He laughed deeply, as though the question were freighted with humor.

"Well," he said, "I am not the first man who has suspected Rand of stealing cattle — or of doing worse. You see, Miss Seddon, a man's reputation has much to do with the way a community judges him."

"Do you mean that Rand has an evil reputation?"

"Well," he said, watching her covertly, "there is ill-feeling between Rand and myself because of his attitude about water. And so I don't care to be hard on him. But

it is my opinion ——" He hesitated, cleared his throat, and then became silent.

"I—I see," she said, gulping, "you don't want to condemn him." And at this minute the generosity of the big man seated near her impressed her quite as deeply as had Rand's on the day she had questioned him about the water.

"But," she said, determined to continue this conversation, "that attitude is a false one, isn't it? For if Rand is guilty of anything—any crime—people should talk about him, shouldn't they? And," she continued, affecting unconcern, though her muscles were swelling and her heart thumping with the effort she was making to appear calm, "you spoke of Rand doing worse. What is there worse than stealing cattle?"

Compton concealed a smile with the palm of one of his hands before he answered—for he knew what was in her mind. And his voice seemed to be burdened with reluctance.

"There's talk of a girl—a dance-hall girl of Ocate. And there's a boy—Bud; I think his name is——" He paused and looked at her, and saw her hands clench tightly.

"Who is the dance-hall girl?" she questioned. She knew this talk was not conventional, and she was stricken with horror over the impulse that had moved her to ask

the question; but the terrible doubt and curiosity she had yielded to had compelled her to speak. She sat, her face dead-white, in the silence that followed her words. She did not look at Compton—she did not dare, for had he seen her eyes at this moment he must have seen the strained anxiety in them.

“Lucia Morell,” said Compton, slowly watching her, his eyes glittering with a vindictive amusement.

She had wanted corroboration—and she had it now. And her heart was a dead-weight within her. And yet, keenly watching her, Compton was thrilled with admiration for the manner in which she received the blow.

Her face was pallid, and there was mute agony in the look she threw at Compton as she got up and stood, meeting his gaze fairly.

And Compton saw, back of the agony in her eyes, the dawning light of a great resentment and indignation.

Compton’s stratagem had been a success, he knew, yet he kept his face expressionless, concealing his satisfaction behind a studied aloofness, which gave the girl the impression that he knew nothing of her thoughts.

He even helped her. Smiling, pretending he did not see the agony in her eyes, he got up also.

“It’s a great morning for a ride, Miss Seddon,” he said: “won’t you go with me for a short gallop?”

She nodded, not trusting herself to speak.

And while Compton roped Silver, and saddled and bridled him, the girl was in the house changing her dress.

The reaction had come swiftly, and when she emerged from the house to meet Compton there was no sign in her eyes or in her manner to indicate that a romance upon which she had built dreams had been shattered.

CHAPTER XXIV

PICKING A LEADER

OCATE, as far from civilization in spirit as it was, geographically, from the nearest railroad, was not without a certain civic pride. It had been that pride—strong in the breasts of a considerable number of the town's citizens, which had kept Ocate from becoming what a number of western cow towns had become, a place where the criminal element could meet in perfect security.

Immunity from the law was not to be found in Ocate, for the sturdy and honest citizens of the town were in a majority, and they demanded from the law the protection from evildoers that the law provided.

Webster was a renegade—a recreant from the principles he had voiced when seeking election. And there were many citizens of Ocate who had observed Webster's growing intimacy with the lawless from sections of the country beyond the stretching plains that surrounded the town. These men had drifted in, and many of them had stayed. For the decent citizens of the town could see them—swaggering in and out of the saloons, cursing, gambling, fighting.

Moggs, the agent of the express company, had been

as observant as any of Ocate's good citizens. He had noted Webster's intimacy with the lawless idlers that lately, in always increasing numbers, had been coming to town, and it had been upon Moggs' recommendation communicated to certain other good citizens, in secret, that the vigilance committee, headed by Link Compton, had been formed.

Link Compton had a reputation for honesty and square dealing. He was known to be a force; a driving spirit for good in the community. He was magnetic, seemed to be capable, and in the secret meeting of the newly formed vigilance committee his voice was raised loudest for protection from the depredations of the thieves who had begun to infest Ocate and the surrounding country.

However, Moggs—deeply concerned over the interests of the company he represented—did not fail to continue to observe the trend of the people of Ocate toward lawlessness. There had always been a doubt in his mind concerning Compton—he had not been deceived by the big man's counterfeit straightforwardness.

Thus it was that on the morning Slim Kinney descended to the street and stood on the board sidewalk carefully examining his guns, Moggs, rising early, had watched him from behind the curtains of a window in his sleeping quarters above the office of the express company.

On the previous night Moggs had seen Kinney with

Webster, and, looking into the Gilt Edge later, he had seen Kinney, Webster, and Compton sitting companionably at a table.

Moggs did not know Kinney, but he disliked the man at first sight. And so, on the morning, he saw Kinney looking at his weapons, his interest in the man became acute.

After descending to the office, Moggs continued to watch Kinney—missing his breakfast to do so.

He had mentioned Kinney's peculiar conduct to Val Davis, his assistant—who shared Moggs' sleeping quarters—and Davis had laughed carelessly.

"That guy standin' there pickin' his teeth?" Davis asked. "Hell," he continued at Moggs' nod; "he's harmless, I reckon. One of them fourflushers which go around totin' two guns for show."

But Moggs still nursed his suspicions. And when a little later a Swede named Carlson entered the office with a parcel directed to his wife, in Carlson's native land, Moggs' suspicions were confirmed.

"Dat guy," Carlson informed Moggs, "bane one gun-fighter. He's Bernalillo tough. He's no good guy." Carlson laughed. "He's got badge on hes vest which say he bane deppity sheriff. Haw, haw! If guys lak Slim Kinney bane deppity sheriff, this town she's go to hell queeck!"

"You knew him at Bernalillo?" questioned Moggs.

"Sure—I bane know heem. I stop at Bernalillo one year. Kinney he's bad guy—he's mak' trouble lak anyt'ing. He's keel—lak dat!" Carlson snapped his fingers.

And so Moggs continued to nurse his suspicions. He watched Kinney further. And, just before Beaudry Rand rode into town, Moggs saw Compton in a doorway behind Kinney whispering to the man. Compton vanished, and Kinney turned to look up the street.

Moggs, too, glanced up the street, and he saw Rand riding into town. And when the two met near the hitching rail where Kinney had been worsted in the gunfight, Moggs had been a witness to all that had transpired. In the silence he had heard Rand's voice, when he had said to Kinney:

"You figured to perforate me, pretendin I'd resist arrest. I've called the law bluff. If you've got any man in you, you'll flash your guns—now!"

Rand's words had a significance to Moggs, for they indicated that Rand possessed knowledge of the motive behind Kinney's attack on him—back of the gunfighter's forbidding preparations, and back of the silent drama in which Webster, Compton, and the gunfighter had been the actors in the Gilt Edge the night before the clash.

But Moggs had kept silent regarding his suspicions, for

he had not been able to get time to visit the Three Bar to speak to Rand about them. But on the morning of Compton's visit to Eleanor Seddon, Moggs saw Rand ride into town and dismount in front of a store. And shortly afterward Rand was in the express office, in response to Moggs' call, talking with the agent. Val Davis, at work with some packages, was an interested listener.

"It was a frame-up, eh?" said Moggs, his eyes gleaming — after Rand had told him about the midnight affair. "I'd been suspecting something like that in connection with Webster and Compton. I don't blame you a damned bit! Why didn't you blow Kinney apart instead of just shooting a finger off him?"

Rand grinned faintly, remarking slowly: "I reckon I wasn't in a killin' mood that day, Moggs."

"Lord, man; you had *nerve* to buck Kinney at *that* game! Did you know him?" At Rand's slow nod he went on: "And, knowing that, you played her a lone hand! I'd call that mighty unusual!"

"Unusual? Oh, don't!" grinned Rand. "It shaped up so's I had to make the law for myself, an' I did it. Law in Ocate is runnin' to crooks an' plug-uglies."

"It's time for a new deal!" declared Moggs. "We'll form a new vigilance committee, and if Webster doesn't go straight, we'll run him out of town." He looked keenly at Rand, lowering his voice a trifle.

"Would you be willing to head the new vigilance committee?"

A pulse of emotion shot through Rand—Moggs saw it; saw his face redden and his eyes glow. But Rand shook his head.

"I've heard there's been talk goin' around to the effect that I know more about the stealin' that's been goin' on around here than any honest man ought to know," he said.

"Hell!" exploded Moggs; "who is saying that? It's news to me. Moreover, it's a damned lie. Every square man in this section swears by you. And," he went on, an admiring light in his eyes and determination in his voice, "every man knows you can't be scared or bluffed. And whether you want it or not, we're going to make you head the new committee! You've got to accept!"

CHAPTER XXV

RAND'S BLAZING WRATH

RAND had accepted. He rode out of town with an emotion of grim elation tugging at his heart. For in Moggs' demand that he head the new vigilance committee, he saw vindication of himself in the minds of those honest men of Ocate who must have heard the stories his enemies had circulated about him.

He saw more—he felt more. In the trust that Moggs had imposed upon him, he saw what Moggs had not seen—what no man would ever see, and what many men would never suspect—the help they were giving him toward conquering his lust to kill any man who provoked him to wrath.

For if he headed the vigilance committee, he would be compelled to restrain the wild passion to which he had been on the verge of yielding many times; he would have to set a standard of cold, deliberate action by which all the activities of the committee would be shaped—and he would save himself from his passion by governing the passions of other men.

Also, the fact that he had been chosen to head the committee would vindicate him in the eyes of Eleanor Seddon

and he wanted her approval more than he desired the approval of the people of Ocate.

And so he rode homeward, exultant, his pulses leaping, a huge, satisfied grin on his face. For it seemed to him that the world was going very well with him; and that if ever a man had reason to rejoice, it was he.

But not long did his mind dwell upon the honor that had been offered him. He kept thinking of Eleanor Seddon. Since that day in town, four years ago, when he had seen her getting into the stage to go away to school, he had treasured a mental picture of her. Many times when thinking of her he had devised plans to meet her — when she should finish school and come back to the Bar S.

And the plan he had finally accepted was not the one he had used at all. For upon that day when she had come riding out of the southern haze toward the timber he had discarded his plan and had ridden into the timber after her.

Nor since the meeting with her in the timber had things gone as he had often mentally planned. It was all a new game to him, and he had discovered that it was not a game of rules and plans, that it could not be played with premeditation. It was not a game at all — it was a scheme of nature, and it was governed by the depth of a man's desires.

He kept seeing Eleanor as she had stood with her back

to him in the timber, when she had charged him with lying to her. For a moment — when he had seen her raise her chin so disdainfully — he had felt there could be no pardon for him. And he still remembered how his heart had jumped when he had heard her voice calling softly to him — telling him there were liars *and* liars. He would never forget the emphasis she had placed upon that little word, “and.”

And so, riding and thinking of the girl, he came at last to the Three Bar. He was about to turn Midnight into the corral when he saw a strange horse tethered at the corral fence.

The Three Bar had a visitor, and he looked from the strange horse to the porch of the ranchhouse — to see, sitting in a chair, talking with Bud, the girl who had ridden to the Three Bar one night to warn him of Compton's plot to kill him.

His lips straightened a little as he walked toward his visitor; for though he appreciated what she had done for him, he did not purpose to permit her to visit the Three Bar whenever the mood struck her. He grinned at the thought — Eleanor might be jealous.

Rand did not reach the porch. Lucia had seen him coming, and when he started toward her she got off the porch and advanced to meet him. Rand halted near the gatepost upon which Bud had sat many times to “cuss”

the sorrel, and looked gravely at Lucia as she came and stood near him.

"I reckon you're wantin' me for somethin'?" he said. "You must have taken the north trail—us not meetin'. For I've just come from town."

There was no welcome for her in his voice; it was even slightly cold, as though he resented her coming. And his eyes, as they searched hers inquiringly, lacked the warmth she wished to see in them.

Lucia's plan had never agreed with Compton's. When Compton sat in her room that day arranging the plot, a feature of which Lucia had carried out when she went to lie to Eleanor Seddon about the parentage of Bud, Lucia's brain had been athrob with another plan. She had not mentioned the plan to Compton because she knew it would interfere with his—because Lucia knew the perfect working out of her plan would mean the complete failure of Compton's.

Lucia did not expect to win Rand entirely for herself; if she could induce him—or even force him—to give her a portion of that love she craved, she would be satisfied. And the success of her plan would be a blow at Compton—whom she now hated more than ever.

She smiled, her dark eyes drooping from his.

"Yes," she said; "I took the north trail. I didn't want to see you in town—I wanted to see you here, where no

one can hear me. For I have something terrible to tell you."

She had stepped forward until she was close to him, and she now placed both hands on his shoulders and held them tightly, so that she looked into his eyes, her face close to his.

He started at the word she used, stiffened, and lowered his head, looking at her with a level, intent gaze. He had a presentiment that Lucia's visit somehow involved Eleanor, and he said shortly:

"About Miss Seddon?"

"Yes," she replied, and held his shoulders in a firmer grip. "But first," she added, getting an expression of eloquent appeal in her eyes, "I want you to promise not to hurt me. For I had to do it, Rand—Compton made me do it!"

She felt his muscles leap and twitch.

"Do what?" he demanded. "Talk!" he said hoarsely, when she did not reply at once. "What did Compton make you do?"

"Made me lie to Eleanor Seddon. He sent me there last night—to the Bar S. He told me he would kill me if I didn't go. So I went. And I lied about you to her. I told her——"

Her voice trailed off to a whisper as she related the story she had told Eleanor Seddon, and when she finished

her back was against the corral fence; Rand's hands were at her throat, his face twisted in a malignant rage, the cords of his neck standing out, the muscles ripping, telling of the terrific effort he was making to control himself, to keep from strangling her.

For a short space he held her thus, while she cowered from the blazing wrath in his eyes, the disgust, the scorn, the contempt and loathing of his look.

She saw the battle go in her favor, and she knew he was not going to kill her — for he had won back his self-control. But the cold glare of his eyes as he dropped his hands to his sides frightened her more than ever.

Still, she had come to gain what she could out of the wreck she had made, and while he stood there, breathing fast, his eyes agleam with a cold fire that told of the passion that was consuming him, she crept close to him, whispering:

"I'll go to her, Rand; I'll tell her it isn't so — that I lied to her. I'll smooth it all out for you, Rand; I'll do anything you say — if you will only love me a little."

There it was — the grotesque thought which had dominated her throughout; the determination to save what she could out of the miserable chaos of evil into which Compton had driven her. She could not permit Compton to win over Rand — she hated Compton too heartily for that. Nor could she win Rand. She knew that. The best she

could hope for was that Rand, understanding that she had been driven to do what she had done, would forgive her and grant her some measure of the love for which she longed.

But she saw the denial of that wish in Rand's eyes. She saw more—she saw cold contempt in them, a loathing too intense for words, and a bitter fury that made her gasp with the realization that her plan had failed.

Just when it seemed that Rand's wrath was about to break into violent, destroying action, she saw his lips twitch. He laughed—with a sound that froze her into breathless immobility.

“And if I don't agree to love you—a little—what will you do then?”

The cold scorn in his voice stung her to passionate resentment. She saw the dawn of hatred in his eyes—a savage, bitter glow which told her that henceforth he would think of her as something repulsive—too vile to notice. She became on the instant a woman who did not care—the detestable creature he thought her. And she looked straight at him, her eyes wanton with passionate mockery.

“I'll tell her nothing, then. I'll let her believe what I have told her. And she'll never learn the truth. For there is no proof, Rand—not a shred! It's your word against mine and Compton's—and Seddon's. For Sed-

don will lie, Rand—he'll lie to save his own precious reputation."

She expected her words would hurt Rand. To her astonishment he laughed again—deep in his throat; a sound that had no mirth in it—the laugh of a man who has lost something he knows he can never regain.

"You're through, eh?" he said. "An' that's what it means—that you've done this thing, hopin' I'd like you a little? Bah! I like you so well that I'd roast in hell for a thousand years before I'd let Eleanor Seddon know I'd ever looked at you! Get out of here now—get back to town—to your damned coyote friend—an' thank God that you're not a man—so I could tear the damned heart out of you!"

There was a cold flame in his eyes that awed her; and she slipped sidewise along the fence and to her horse, which she mounted. After taking up the reins, though, she laughed spitefully, her face convulsed with rage.

"You wouldn't let her know you ever saw me, eh? She's too good—too pure, too innocent. Ha, ha! Before Link Compton gets through with her *she'll* not be fit to look at me, either!"

She slapped her horse viciously and rode toward Ocate. Rand, white and tense, his muscles straining as he held to the top rail of the corral fence, watched her until she vanished beyond the crest of a rise.

CHAPTER XXVI

THE YEARNING FOR VENGEANCE

RETURNING from her ride with Compton, Eleanor found her father waiting for her on the big front porch. He looked keenly at her when she came close to him, and he knew from the dull, apathetic expression of her eyes that Compton had corroborated Lucia's story—and that Eleanor believed Rand guilty.

However, Seddon was not the man to permit an opportunity to slip by—and this was his chance to make the case strong against Rand. And if Eleanor believed Lucia, there would never be any more dread in Seddon's heart that Rand would tell about the boy; he could again live as he had yearned to live—without the fear that one day Eleanor would discover the truth and grow to despise him.

Seddon gave no thought to Eleanor—that she might suffer much mental agony. He had a vague impression that she seemed to be slightly troubled; but he had no doubt that Link Compton could cure *that* trouble. At any rate, *ne* was safe.

"You was with Link, Ellie? He said he was ridin' over here."

She sank into a chair, nodding affirmatively.

"Where'd you leave Link?"

"In the big basin," she replied.

Compton had been agreeable, but the pleasure she had got out of the ride with him had been negative, for she had not been able to get her thoughts off Rand. She still nursed a doubt — and now she meant to determine if there was reason for it.

"Daddy," she said firmly, "do you know a woman named Lucia Morell?"

"Yes," returned Seddon. He was glad Eleanor was *not* looking at him.

"She was here last night. She came to tell me that *she* is the mother of Rand's boy — Bud — and that Rand *is* its father. Is that true?"

"I reckon it is, Ellie. Leastwise, it's common talk."

"Why didn't you tell me — before?"

"I wasn't reckonin' to say mean things about Rand," he replied virtuously. "You'll recollect that I told you once not to go hangin' around the Three Bar — an' the timber. That's what I meant, Ellie."

The girl remembered. She got up silently and went into the house. Half an hour later Seddon went in. Not finding Eleanor in any of the lower rooms he went upstairs and knocked on the door of her bedroom, asking her to come down for supper.

She told him she did not wish to be disturbed, and Sed

don went downstairs again and sat for some time on the porch, gazing thoughtfully through the evening haze toward the Three Bar. And as he sat there a haunting fear came into his soul, for he half expected to see Rand come riding out of the haze to exact the vengeance he had threatened should Seddon defame him to the girl who, in her room, was sobbing bitterly into her pillow.

But Rand did not come riding out of the haze upon an errand of vengeance. Nor did he ride to the Bar S the next day—or the next. If he had come, Eleanor would have known that he cared. But because he did not come she felt that he must lack the courage to face her. For on the following day Compton rode over again and told her that Lucia Morell had visited Rand, and had told Rand that she had informed Eleanor of their intimacy.

“That’s why you asked me about the boy?” said Compton, when he related the story to Eleanor.

Eleanor reddened. “Please don’t speak of it again,” she said, with a flash of indignation.

And Compton did not speak of it again. However, he spoke of other things. And as the days fled and Rand did not appear, Compton and Eleanor rode abroad many times.

The big man exerted himself to please, and when he chose he could make his magnetism felt by women.

Eleanor was conscious of the lure of him, and yet she

did not yield to it. For she was beginning to realize that her faith in Rand had been stronger than she had thought. And she kept seeing him as he had looked at her that day in the timber when she had told him she detested a liar — the earnest wistfulness of him, the sincerity gleaming in his eyes; his subterfuge to get her to visit the Three Bar — all those things were vivid in her mind, and would not be denied. Thus, Compton's progress was slow.

He knew, however, that he would win. His confidence was in his eyes, in his manner, and in his voice.

At the Three Bar was another man whose confidence was sadly shaken. In fact, he had no confidence in himself at all. For he did not know at what moment the driving intensity of his yearning to kill would conquer him. The rending, tearing passions that reigned in his heart; the hideous, volcanic impulses which tugged at him, were daily becoming more wild and insistent. They were blighting him; they were destroying all his good impulses; so that even when he looked at his mother's picture on the wall of his bedroom, his heart was full of the poison of hatred.

Many times, looking at the picture, his lips wreathed into a cold, twisting, sardonic grin — and only the reproachful eyes of the woman kept him from yielding to the terrible longing for vengeance — the yearning to kill Compton.

CHAPTER XXVII

THE MARKINGS OF MIDNIGHT

CARTER, Lefty Morgan, and Slim Kinney were playing cards in the Two Link bunkhouse on a night about two weeks following the day Eleanor Seddon had listened to Lucia Morell's fabrication about Rand. The kerosene lamp on the rough table between the card-players had a smoke-begrimed chimney, but in the light from the lamp the faces of the men revealed the intentness with which they strove for victory.

Slim Kinney's finger had not completely healed, but he handled his cards dexterously with it—though at times he mumbled threats against the man who had injured it.

The drive northward with the stolen mavericks had been profitable, and the faces of the men revealed their satisfaction. During a deal Carter grinned at the others.

"Link's makin' the divvy tomorrow," said Carter. "We'll hit town tomorrow night."

Expansive grins greeted this announcement. But with the cards in his hand, ready to distribute, the dealer paused and sat silent, facing the door in a listening attitude.

"Someone's comin', hell-bent!" he said.

During the silence which followed his words the men could hear the rapid drumming of hoofs.

With a concerted movement the men got up and crowded to the door, peering out into the starlighted night toward the southern distance — from which direction the sounds seemed to come.

The horseman must have been close when the dealer heard the sounds of his coming, for it was not many minutes before a blot took shape in the level near the bunkhouse, and a big bay horse thundered up to the bunkhouse door; a man leaped from his back and ran, with whizzing spurs, toward the waiting group.

"Where's Link?" he demanded breathlessly.

"It's Val Davis!" exclaimed Carter, as the man came within the glare of light from the doorway.

"Rushed, eh?" laughed Morgan, sarcastically.

"Rushed — yes!" snapped Val Davis. "Where's Link? Damn you — where is he?"

"He's in the house," answered Kinney.

"You guys get ready to jump!" Davis yelled back as he ran toward the house. "It's what you've been waitin' for — gold dust on the stage, headin' east!"

Davis vanished into the darkness toward the ranch-house; while the other men, after one swift glance at one another, ran to the lean-to adjoining the stable to get their saddles.

A yell into the door of the bunkhouse brought other men out—and these, too, ran for their saddles.

At the ranchhouse Link Compton was opening the door of his office upon Val Davis.

Davis grinned excitedly as Compton opened the door for him. He closed the door, and stood with his back to it, while Compton, intensely interested, waited for him to get his breath.

“Well,” Compton said, impatiently, after a short interval, “what’s up?”

“Another shipment—east!” gasped Davis. “Twenty thousand!”

The expression of Compton’s face changed; it became designing, triumphant, full of greed.

“The eleven o’clock?”

“You’re shoutin’.”

Compton looked at his watch. “We’ve got two hours,” he said grinning. “Plenty of time. We’ll stop her on Red Butte slope.” He began to change his clothing, donning overalls, chaps, spurs, woolen shirt. From a closet he drew a black mask and a big neckerchief.

While he dressed Davis talked rapidly:

“I’ve put the boys wise—they’re jumpin’,” he grinned. “You remember me tellin’ you about Moggs askin’ Rand to head the new vigilance committee? Well, he’s headin’ it—on Moggs’ say-so. Moggs didn’t have time to go

through with it before this news of the gold shipment come in."

Davis grinned wickedly with venomous satire.

"Moggs has a lot of confidence in Rand. I'm supposed to be ridin' to the Three Bar right now, to tell Rand to take a bunch of his guys an' escort the stage from the lower Canadian through town, to Red Rock mesa. Rand an' his outfit would be hittin' that trail if I'd have gone direct there."

Tightening his belt, Compton's eyes gleamed.

"So Moggs don't trust me any more," he said. "On the next trip to town one of you guys salivate Carlson—the damned meddler!" he added vindictively. He laughed harshly, and in the gleam of his eyes appeared the dawning of a crafty thought.

"So Moggs is sending for Rand, eh?" He stood motionless, looking at Davis; and the cunning deepened in his eyes.

"How steady have you looked at Rand's horse, Midnight?" he inquired of Davis.

"A heap steady."

"He ain't all black. What's his markings?"

"White," replied Davis; "a long oval on his left fore-leg above the knee, an' a spot as big as your hand on his right hip. That's all. What in hell you gettin' at?"

Compton laughed. A few minutes later, followed by

Davis, he ran down to the bunkhouse, where a number of his men were congregated. He spoke rapidly to Morgan, and that individual chuckled with glee.

Then, with the men clustered around them, Morgan and Compton performed some mysterious labor with Morgan's black horse. When that labor was completed the men, Compton leading, riding Morgan's black, rode southward rapidly into the white glare of an early moon that was just lifting its rim above the peaks of a mountain range.

CHAPTER XXVIII

UNMASKED

WHEN Link Compton left the Bar S late in the afternoon, after spending several hours riding with Eleanor Seddon, the girl sat on the threshold of the rear doorway of the ranchhouse, watching him until he struck the edge of the long slope that led into the basin.

Compton had been very gallant that day, and Eleanor felt the lure of him more than ever. There had been a moment that afternoon — when he had assisted her to dismount in a shaded section of the river trail — when physical contact with the man had sent a queer thrill over the girl.

It was the sex call, she knew; and afterward the recollection of the incident had disgusted her; she had felt the shame of reaction over the emotion. But, also, she realized the danger that confronted her. And so, reflecting over the incident now, she decided that hereafter she would not go riding with Compton.

For she could not bring herself to like the man. She was aware of his magnetism, but she did not like the bold confidence of his eyes when he looked at her; and she saw something hard and cruel and vindictive in him at times.

She could not help contrasting him with Rand. For, despite all she had heard of Rand, she had been impressed with him, and her chief emotion when thinking of him was that of regret that she could no longer trust or respect him.

She sighed and got up, walking into the house.

The Mexican woman smiled at her as she passed through the kitchen, and Eleanor spoke kindly to her, at which the woman nodded toward the open doorway, in the direction Compton had taken when leaving the ranch-house. The woman grinned with subtle deprecation.

"Theeze man, Compton, he's no good for lady," she said. "Too—what you call—fresh! He's too fresh. Missus no—what you say—hook up to him, huh? Rand—he's nize man—beeg, grand, straight."

"What do you know about Rand?"

The girl resented the woman's comments, but an overwhelming desire to hear something that would promise a slight hope for vindication fought the resentment, and she seized the woman by an arm—the firm grip bringing a knowing smile to the other's face.

"Rand's nize man," said the woman. "Ver' nize. He's take Millie Crofton's boy to bring heem home to the Three Bar to raise heem. Rand—he's like to love—he's hongry for love—for somet'ing to love. An' he bring Millie's boy home—to love heem."

"Millie Crofton's boy!" exclaimed Eleanor breathlessly. "Why, who is Millie Crofton?"

"Millie? She's no here any more, missus. She's die—two, t'ree, four years ago, mebbe. She's dance-hall girl in Gilt Edge. She's mudder of what you call—Bud—theeze boy Rand take home."

"How do you know?" The girl was pale and rigid, and her eyes were glowing with a light that made the Mexican woman smile broadly, with cunning.

"No mooch people know that, eh?" she said. "You t'ink Rand Bud's father? Somebody lie to you, eh? Mebbe that girl who come here the other night, eh?"

"Yes—yes!" gasped Eleanor. Both her hands were gripping the woman's shoulders now; and she shook the other savagely for digressing.

"How do *you* know? Tell me!" she demanded; "tell me—instantly!"

"I see somet'ing," grinned the woman; "an' I know plenty. When Millie Crofton get seek one day she send man over here. Your father gone—to Frisco. Theeze man take me to Gilt Edge, where Millie Crofton seek. An' Millie say to me——"

Here the woman whispered. And when she concluded Eleanor's face was crimson, and the light in her eyes was so eloquent that the woman, observing it, remarked gleefully:

“Rand—he’s nize man, after all, eh?”

But Eleanor did not answer. She fled to her room, and there, on a chair, she sat with clasped hands, looking out of a window toward the Three Bar, the shadows of twilight, slowly dimming the river trail, seeming much like the coming of the dawn to her.

For tomorrow, very early in the morning, she would ride the river trail—to Rand and to Bud.

And she would never see Link Compton any more; she would never look at him again. She felt that, somehow, Compton was concerned in all this; that neither he nor her father had told her the truth—and she meant to *have* the truth. She would go tomorrow to Rand and speak plainly to him; no emotion of false modesty would deter her. And she would *make* him tell her what was between him and her father, for she knew now that there was something.

For though Seddon had not directly accused Rand of the parentage of Bud, he had intimated as much; and he had shown in many ways that he did not like Rand.

Later, she again questioned the Mexican woman, discovering that Millie Crofton had not divulged the secret that had agitated the section. But this much, however, she had learned—that Lucia Morell had lied, and that her father and Compton had seemed to align themselves with the girl.

Seething with the emotions that had gripped her, Eleanor found that the ranchhouse irritated her. She must get outside, into the big, open country, where she could breathe freely, and where she would have room to exult in the knowledge that had come to her.

Mounting Silver, she sent him on a rapid gallop down the river trail. Almost, when she had ridden a few miles, she was tempted to go at once to the Three Bar to have that talk with Rand. But she decided to wait until morning. For she wanted to think much before she faced Rand.

Darkness had enveloped the plains when she wheeled Silver and sent him scampering over the back trail.

When she neared the Bar S ranchhouse, she veered and passed to one side of it, riding westward, toward the Las Vegas trail.

At nine o'clock, after twilight had yielded to darkness — she found herself seated upon a huge, flat rock on the crest of a small hill. The glare of an early moon, swimming in a star-dotted azure sky, was in her eyes, and she turned her back to it, gazing at the plains, suffused with a soft, golden light.

For a long time, watching the plains, noting the shadows in the depressions, and the luminous crests of rises that were bathed in the moonlight, she reflected that many times in the years before she had left home to go to

Denver, she had journeyed to this very hill. The splendid isolation of the place had always enthralled her. And tonight it was a place that satisfied her mood.

The hill was small and its top was flat, and she was screened from sight by a thick, tall tangle of nondescript trees and bushes. Below her, where she had left Silver, was a shallow arroyo. The arroyo quite concealed Silver, however, and the animal, contented to rest after the long gallop, was browsing the grass and the tops of the weeds in the arroyo bottom, seemingly indifferent concerning the length of its rider's stay on the hilltop.

The eastern side of the hill, up which the girl had climbed, was a gentle slope; but the western side dropped sheer, perhaps twenty feet, to the deep, light sand on the plains.

The hill, Eleanor had always thought, had formed part of a ridge. A cloud-burst or other action of the elements, had made a huge gash in it, forming a "draw," in the vernacular of the country. Time and the action of the wind had almost obliterated the other section of the ridge, so that the girl had an unobstructed view of the Las Vegas trail and the frowning, red buttes that fringed the narrow bridle path.

The buttes extended far. In daylight they were rugged, dotted with huge, red rocks; and they held no beauty for the girl. But at night they loomed like solemn sentinels of

the land, seeming to bar from her comprehension the mystery of the great desert beyond them.

Scanning the northern limits of the buttes, Eleanor sighed. She had ridden far and she was tired. And she got up, intending to descend the hill to Silver, when she saw, far out on the plains, northward, a number of horsemen sweeping swiftly toward her.

She sat down again, experiencing a sudden tremor of disquiet. Instantly her thoughts leaped to the stories of rustlers told by her father, and she shrank down upon the rock, determined to delay her departure until the men passed.

The men were still a great distance away, but she knew that if she tried to leave the hill now they would see her, for though the distance to them was great, she could see them plainly enough. And so she waited.

But little time elapsed, though, until she could see them more plainly. They were heading in a southwesterly direction, and at first the girl thought they intended to pass the end of the red buttes and enter the desert. But when they reached the buttes, they swerved and came swiftly down the trail toward the hill from which she watched.

She held her breath in fear that they would ride straight upon her, and it was with vast relief that she saw them halt on the trail nearly opposite her.

And at that instant she divined what they had come for. They intended to rob the stage.

Her father had informed her regarding the time of the arrival in Ocate of this stage; she remembered that he had complained that the stage company had "no business" trying to "make" Ocate at that unearthly hour. If robbers insisted on holding up the stage, the company ought to make them do it in the daylight, Seddon had declared.

Eleanor was intensely interested, even though a vicious resentment filled her—a resentment mingled with the fear of discovery.

She watched the men; saw them separate, some of them riding through a break in the butte, others dismounting and leading their horses into a deep, brush-fringed gully that skirted the trail. In another instant they were invisible.

There were ten men; Eleanor counted them as they sought the concealment the place afforded. But she was no longer interested in their actions—that is, in the movements, of nine of them. For she singled out one—apparently the leader—who rode a big, black horse. And in the clear moonlight she had recognized the horse. It was Midnight—she could tell that from his peculiar markings, the white oval on his left foreleg and the white spot on his right hip. No two horses could ever be

marked exactly the same way; and so the girl groaned and buried her face in her hands.

For she knew now that what her father had said about Rand was true—he was the outlaw who had been robbing the stage. For a venomous moment the girl hoped the men on the stage would kill him for deceiving her, and in the next she was craning her neck for a better view.

For far up the trail she saw the stage coming, winding its way toward her, toward the point where the robbers were lying in wait.

The girl had a mad impulse to shout to the driver when the stage came within sound of her voice, but she did not yield to it, divining that a warning would not avert the impending meeting—that if she shouted there might be bloodshed. Breathing fast, leaning forward and parting the bushes that she might get a better view, she waited.

It was not for long. The stage came rolling down a little slope toward the waiting men, struck a level, and began to ascend a slight rise. So near was the girl that she could hear the creaking of the harness leather on the horses, could hear the muffled rattling of the wheels. Above those sounds rose the voice of the driver, talking loudly to a passenger beside him on the box.

The girl could not help drawing a mental comparison of this peaceful scene and the one that would instantly follow it—if the occupants of the stage resisted.

What happened within the next few minutes was so odd that the girl entirely forgot she should be concealing herself; she stood up and watched, her eyes bright, her lips parted.

She heard the sharp challenge from the road agents; she heard the shriek of the brakes as the driver jammed them on, she saw the driver and the man on the box beside him raise their hands and clamber down.

Then the door of the coach opened and other men emerged, their hands also in the air. They were ranged beside the stage by some of the robbers, who had emerged from their concealment when their leader had uttered his challenge—and another robber was searching them.

The rider of the big, black horse did nothing. He sat, a menacing figure, in the saddle, a gleaming six-shooter in hand, the black horse prancing and turning from side to side, forcing his rider constantly to twist in the saddle to keep his weapon trained on the driver.

One of the robbers cut the traces, freeing the leaders—and the animals unconcernedly moved up the trail a little distance and began to nibble the trail grass.

Another robber opened the "boot" and threw down a heavy box, which fell with a dull thud into the sand of the trail. The robber carried the box a little distance, and with an ax, that he also took from the stage, began to smash the lock of the treasure box. He worked viciously,

and an instant later the girl saw him taking something from the box.

Then the scene changed swiftly. At a word from the leader the robber band was on the move once more. They quickly mounted their horses — some of them reappearing from the cleft in the butte — and with a concerted movement they all rode swiftly toward the hill upon which the girl stood.

She noted the movement in time and crouched down, so that the men could not see her, and she was hoping they would ride past her concealment when she saw them halt, not more than twenty feet from the mouth of the draw. Their leader, slightly behind them, joined the others as they halted.

They wore masks — all of them, and the girl's heart was full of savage indignation as she watched the leader.

That was Midnight, she told herself; she would know the horse at sight, anywhere. And his rider was Rand — she would have sworn to that, too. She was on the verge of calling to him, to tell him in no uncertain words what she thought of him for committing this outrage, when he laughed, lowly, in answer to a question, put to him gruffly by one of his men:

"What in hell you goin' this way for?"

"We're heading straight toward the Three Bar!" said the rider of the black horse. "Those yaps will see us, and

my vigilance committee will be hanging Rand in the morning!"

Eleanor knew, then, why the men had halted. They thought, possibly, that their leader should have gone in another direction, and they had waited to satisfy themselves regarding that point.

Another thing the girl knew. She knew that the rider of the black horse was not Rand, but Compton. For she recognized his voice. And as the men spurred their horses past the hill, she got a distinct view of Compton's face as he removed the mask and rode away with the others, a huge grin on his lips.

Eleanor waited for a time—until she saw the horsemen vanish into the hazy distance. Long before they disappeared the stage rolled onward toward Ocate; and the girl descended the hill, mounted Silver, and sent him homeward.

She was determined to stop at the Bar S only an instant, to see if her father had come in, and then she was going to ride to the Three Bar, to warn Rand of the evil that Compton had set in motion against him.

And as she rode there was a glad song in her heart; for she had misjudged a man, and she was going to him to tell him that he was greater than even she had dreamed—in the time when her dreams had been sweetest—and that she would never again doubt him.

CHAPTER XXIX

THE TRAP

COMPTON and his men fled eastward, straight toward the Three Bar, until they could no longer be seen by the occupants of the stage; then they veered northeastward, heading toward the Two Link.

Long before they were out of sight from the stage, Compton joined Val Davis near the head of the group of running horses. Davis and Compton rode side by side for a mile or two, Compton talking fast to Davis; and when the group veered and went northeastward, Davis left them and sent his horse clattering along the rim of the big basin.

It was not long before Davis came in sight of the Three Bar ranchhouse. Halting his horse at the far corner of the pasture fence, Davis dismounted. He took from a saddle pocket a small canvas bag that Compton had given him during the ride toward the Three Bar, and stuck it in a hip pocket. Then, grinning, he dropped to the feathery dust that covered the section, rolling over and over until the dust covered him. Then he climbed on his horse and rode furiously toward the Three Bar ranchhouse.

The house was dark when Davis dismounted at a

side door, but Davis made as much noise as possible—stamping heavily on the small stoop he was compelled to cross, and hammering loudly upon the door.

He shouted two or three times when he heard someone moving about inside the house; and when Rand opened the door and stood back in the darkness of the interior, a six-shooter in hand, he exclaimed gruffly at sight of the dust-covered figure that greeted him.

“What you wantin’?” he demanded.

“I’m Val Davis!” declared the other, feigning intense excitement. “Lord—let me come in an’ set down—I’m sure tuckered!”

Rand strode to a table and lighted a kerosene lamp. Both men stood blinking in the glare of light; and Davis saw he was in Rand’s office. He dropped into a convenient chair—close to Rand’s desk—and stretched out, flinging his arms wide, looking at Rand with tired eyes, his mouth open.

“What’s up?” demanded Rand. He had drawn on his trousers when he had got up to investigate the disturbance made by Davis—he was barefooted, his hair disheveled; and with the gun in hand he made a picture which would have awed Davis had he come with open hostility.

The light nightshirt worn by Rand was open at the throat, exposing the swell of his neck almost to the shoulders and a portion of his chest. Davis could see

the rippling muscles — the visible signs of physical strength, and there was a measure of admiration mingled with his awe.

But Davis' mind was full of craft. He feigned breathlessness, exhaustion; and he gasped at Rand:

"I'll tell you — in a minute. Get me a drink — quick! I'll sure go under in a jiffy!"

Rand laid his gun on the desk and went into another room — Davis could hear him talking to someone, saying there was nothing wrong — that a man had come from town to see him.

Rand had not more than left the room in which Davis sat before Davis' exhaustion departed. Swiftly he pulled out a drawer of the desk, dropped into it the canvas bag he had transferred previously from the saddle pocket to the pocket of his trousers, together with a black mask and a large red neckerchief. Then he closed the drawer, and when Rand reappeared, bearing a bottle and a glass, Davis was sitting lax in the chair, breathing heavily.

"Now," said Rand, after Davis had emptied a glass that Rand filled for him.

"Moggs sent me here—right after nine o'clock—when we got word—to tell you that he wanted you to get your boys together to escort the stage into town. There was twenty thousand on her. I was comin'—hell-bent — when my cayuse fell an' throwed me. It was

almost eleven when I come to—lyin' flat on my back, lookin' at the moon. I wasn't more'n halfway here, an' I knowed it wasn't no use to try to get you in time, an' so I hit the breeze to Red Butte slope to kind of see if things went all right.

"When I got to Red Butte slope it had happened. The stage was headin' toward town, crippled; an' a gang of guys was ridin' south. I reckon, if you could get your men together, you'd be able to round them robbers up. Lord! Moggs will salivate me for bunglin' this job."

"South—you say?" demanded Rand. It was his first job as chief of the vigilantes—his first opportunity to demonstrate that the trust reposed in him was not misplaced. Also, it would give him an opportunity to work off some of that surplus energy which for days had sought an outlet. It would give him something tangible upon which to vent the cold fury which—since Lucia Morell's visit—had gnawed at him, filling him with a bitter malignance.

He was moving when he spoke to Davis; and it seemed only an instant to the latter from the time Rand vanished into the darkness of another room until he reappeared, fully dressed, buckling on his cartridge belt. Jamming into one of his holsters the pistol he had laid upon the desk, he blew out the light and, with Davis following, went to the corral to rope Midnight.

Later, riding into the distance toward Ocate, Davis brought his horse to a halt. Rand, observing Davis stop, pulled Midnight down.

"I'm goin' back to town, to tell Moggs what's happened," Davis said. "Them guys went straight into the desert, passin' the red buttes. It's likely they headed for Las Vegas. How many of the boys you takin'?"

"There's half a dozen workin' the far end of the big basin," said Rand; "I'll take them. Larry Redfern an' his bunch are at the other end—it's too far now to bother. I'll play her with six."

Midnight was plunging away with Rand's last words, and as Davis rode toward town he watched the black horse and rider vanish down the long slope of the basin. Davis grinned derisively as he rode, muttering:

"He bit—hard!"

CHAPTER XXX

CARRYING THE NEWS

THE stage crept into Ocate, the traces lashed together with some wire that the driver, Ben Toban, had produced from the box; and when it drew up in front of the office of the express company, Moggs was on the sidewalk, standing in the glare of light from the open doorway, waiting.

He ran forward when Toban clambered down, listening, his jaws grimly set, to the verbal disgust that flowed from Toban's lips. Disregarding the babble of the passengers, who were grouped on the sidewalk near the stage, gesticulating and bemoaning the loss of their valuables, Toban carried the broken treasure box into the office and set it heavily down on a table. Then he looked at Moggs, who had followed him inside.

Toban's eyes were gleaming with knowledge and venom—which Moggs saw.

"The damned brazen buzzard!" blurted Toban. "The mis'able whelp! I'd know him anywhere. I always did mistrust that guy!"

"Who?" demanded Moggs.

"Rand!" bellowed Toban—"Beau Rand! He's the

guy! Git your vigilantes together an' go after him. I'd know that Midnight horse anywheres. They headed straight for the Three Bar, an' if you an' your vigilantes don't string that guy up before mornin', you ain't no good—that's what!"

Moggs gripped the table edge and looked at Toban, his eyes blazing with mingled astonishment and wrath.

"You sure, Toban?" he said hoarsely; "there mustn't be any mistake about this!"

"Sure as shootin'!" declared the driver. "I was standin' not more'n ten feet from him, an' I seen the markin's of that Midnight horse. I've noticed them markin's particular—a white oval on the left foreleg an' a white blotch on the right hip. Sure? Oh, hell!"

Moggs grinned with mirthless irony—for at this minute he reflected upon how he had trusted Rand—and how he had insisted that Rand should accept the leadership of the vigilantes. Leaving Toban in the office, Moggs ran from building to building, searching for those of the vigilance committee upon whom he could depend.

Long before he could assemble them, Val Davis rode into town and dropped from his horse in front of the office. There in the midst of his activities, Moggs came upon him and dragged him into the office.

"What's happened to you?" demanded Moggs, noting the dust on Davis' clothing.

"I started for the Three Bar — as you told me," said Davis, affecting great excitement. "About halfway there my horse throwed me. I must have been knocked out, for when I come to it was about eleven — time for the stage. It was too late to do anything about the stage — an' I thought you was mighty scary without cause — an' so I hit the breeze to the Three Bar, anyway, figurin' that if anything had happened you would want Rand to be on the job. An' so I went to the Three Bar. I don't remember that I was thinkin' anyways clear at all, anyway.

"When I got to the Three Bar there was a bunch of horses there — an' Rand. Rand took me into his office. He was all dusty — like he'd rode hard. It seemed mighty suspicious that him an' his men was gallivantin' around the country that late; and when Rand left the office for a minute to go outside, I nosed around a little. An' in a drawer of his desk — which was open a little — I saw a bag of dust an' a black mask. The bag was one of them little canvas things that the company uses for all its dust — with the company's name on it in black letters."

Toban, standing near, laughed harshly.

"I reckon that's proof!" he said triumphantly.

"You don't mean that the stage was held up?" demanded Davis sharply, feigning surprise. And then, with the eyes of Toban and Moggs, and some members

of the vigilance committee upon him, Davis seemed to realize there was some connection between what he had said he had seen at the Three Bar and the robbery of the stage.

"So that's it;" he said; "that's how Rand come to have the bag of dust an' the mask. There might have been more bags—if I had kept on lookin'.

"I didn't stay there long," Davis continued; "Rand didn't seem to want me. I started back. But it all seemed mighty suspicious to me, an' when I got to a ridge about two miles from the Three Bar I stopped an' watched. An' I hadn't been gone long when the Three Bar bunch heads out, ridin' hard toward the big basin.

"Rand was with them—ridin' the Midnight horse. He went into the basin with the rest. An' they stopped, but Rand kept on goin'—headin' toward the Las Vegas trail."

"That's all," said Moggs grimly. "We'll get goin'. But we'll ride to the Three Bar first, to see what we can find in Rand's desk."

Within half an hour, headed by Moggs, the members of the vigilance committee rode out of town into the first gray light of the dawn which seemed to appear above the horizon far beyond the spot where the buildings of the Three Bar, deserted by their owner, snuggled the peaceful banks of a river.

CHAPTER XXXI

A NEW FOE

WHEN Eleanor Seddon came in sight of the Bar S ranchhouse she saw a light shining through one of the kitchen windows. She experienced a thrill of satisfaction, for she divined that her father had come in. The Mexican woman, she knew, always retired early, and so the light in the kitchen could mean only one thing—that Seddon had come in and was taking a midnight lunch.

She was riding down the corral fence near the bunkhouse when she saw the light vanish, and she decided that her father had finished his meal and was going to bed.

She slid off Silver at the corral gate, trailing the reins over his head, and hurried toward the house—for she wanted to tell her father where she was going, so that he would not worry about her.

She was breathing fast from the wild ride from the Red Buttes, and she took no note of anything as she crossed the ranchhouse yard, except to notice that her father had not put his horse away—the animal was standing near the stable door, the reins trailed over his head.

The side door, opening into her father's office, was ajar, and she entered, searching for the lamp that was

usually on the desk. She found it after a while, and while lighting it, called loudly for her father, thinking that if he had not yet gone upstairs she would save time by talking to him here.

But no reply reached her ears, and she took up the lamp, lighting her way as she walked through the dining-room toward the sitting-room, which opened upon the stairs leading to the second floor.

At the foot of the stairs she called again. Receiving no answer, she started to climb the stairs, and she had reached the fourth or fifth step when she heard a muffled groan, seeming to come from the kitchen.

Startled, she retraced her steps, crossed the sitting-room, and walked into the kitchen, expecting to see her father there.

What she did see made the lamp waver in her hands until the chimney rocked wildly back and forth—the blaze fluttering and reaching out a licking tongue that almost singed her hair.

The Mexican woman was lying on the floor near the kitchen table, face down.

She seemed to have been hurt, and Eleanor set the lamp on the kitchen table and leaned over the woman, deeply concerned. Kneeling, she called softly to the woman, and when she heard a smothered sound issuing from the woman's mouth, she seized her head and turned it sidewise, to see a handkerchief bound tightly

over her lips, and securely knotted at the back of her head.

Amazed, she started back, rising to her feet, a presentiment of evil chilling her blood. As she got to her feet she saw what she had not seen before—the woman's arms, tied tightly behind her. The same glance gave her a glimpse of the woman's legs, bound at the ankles.

Eleanor was in the grip of a mighty paralysis, now. For the presentiment of evil had grown beyond that stage; in her heart was a conviction of danger—a conviction that some evil was in the house with her—perhaps in the same room.

Holding her breath, forcing her quivering muscles to exercise their functions, she slowly turned to face the door through which she had come. She caught her breath with a gasp and fell back two or three steps, her eyes bulging with terror. For in the open doorway at which she was looking was a big, villainous-looking, swarthy-faced man, grinning at her.

She knew, now, why the kitchen light had been blown out; the man had heard her coming, and had prepared this surprise for her. And in this instant she blamed herself for not looking closer at the horse she had seen standing at the stable door.

But these were subconscious thoughts. They flitted through her brain while she was moving away from the

man—backing toward the other side of the kitchen table so that it would be between them should the man attempt to advance toward her.

He noted the movement, and his grin broadened.

"Don't be scare', *señorita*," he said, in a guttural, maudlin voice; and her pulses leaped in terror, for she saw that the man was drunk, and that repulsive passion was lying naked in his eyes.

He said no other word—he needed to say none to convince her of his intentions. For he began to move toward her, crouching a little, staggering and swaying as he crossed the floor.

She had never seen the man before; she was sure he did not work for her father—for at one time or another she had seen all the Bar S men. She was convinced that he was a wanderer, who had stopped at the ranchhouse accidentally—or that he was a friend of the Mexican woman, visiting her and drinking more than was good for him.

He stopped her conjecturing and speculation as he advanced, slipping around the table in order to grasp her.

"Me frien' of dance-hall woman—Lucia," he said, smirking odiously. "Theeze Lucia she say you ver' nize girl—you mak' love to me. She say nobody here—you no care. We alone. We love—eh?"

Retreating from his advance, she gained the side of the table toward the door through which she had en-

tered; and with a quick leap she left the table and ran toward the door. She heard him stumble as he reached for her—his hand almost grasping the hem of her riding skirt.

That stumble saved her, for she was only a step in advance of him when she went out of the door. She would have gone outside to get on her horse and ride away if she had any hope of success. But he was too close to her, and a center table intervened. So she chose her only chance, and when she reached the door leading to the second floor she darted through it, trying to slam it behind her.

She almost succeeded. But when she felt one of his arms sticking through between the jamb and the door she knew she had not succeeded, and that his superior strength would soon remove that barrier.

Shoving viciously on the door, she heard him snarl with pain; and taking advantage of the slight inaction on his part, she turned and fled up the stairs. Reaching her room, she closed the door, slid the fastenings into place—thanking God meanwhile that she had insisted upon her father putting strong ones upon it.

The reaction came now, and she stood with her back to the door, her knees shaking, every muscle and nerve in her body quivering from terror and exhaustion.

She heard the man clamber up the stairs; she listened to his step as he searched the other rooms; she shrank

and cringed when she heard him halt in front of her door. She saw the door give a little as he leaned against it; and she could hear his deep, heavy breathing.

She stood there for, it seemed, many hours, listening to him, making no sound as he tried to coax her to open the door. He told her he had been joking; that he meant her no harm; that all he wanted was food, and then he would go away.

And at last, when he discovered that cajolery would not bring him success, he grew violent—kicking the door, lunging against it, battering it with a chair.

She did not know how long she stood there, dreading, the cold, clammy sweat of terror upon her. But she knew that she could not stand the strain very much longer. Soon, if the man persisted, he would burst the door in.

Looking out of a window in the room some time later, she saw the gray dawn beginning to streak the sky, and she hoped that with the dawn would come assistance. She even hoped that Compton, despite the thing he had done at the Red Buttes, would visit her. Or that her father would come—anybody!

The man had been quiet for a few minutes; now she heard him muttering that he would go down and get an ax; and then——

His threat froze her, and she leaned weakly against the door, listening as the man went down the stairs.

For a brief instant she meditated, almost persuaded to yield to a wild impulse to open the door and try to escape to her horse. But she reflected that perhaps this was a ruse—and she did not yield to the impulse. And then, after a little, she heard a step on the stairs again, and the man's muttering as he stood before the door.

She heard him grunt as he swung the ax—she saw the blade sink through the wood, showing its flashing edge near her face.

She screamed, then. But the man laughed mockingly and swung the ax again; and she cringed back from the door, watching as the man slowly demolished it.

Larry Redfern, riding herd in the big basin, had seen many riders on the rim of the slope during the interval between moonrise and midnight.

First there had been ten or more—who had gone northward like the wind; then he had seen two others—one of whom had seemed to glide down the far side of the basin toward its most southerly end. That one had parted with his companion on the rim of the basin about two miles from where Larry had been riding, and had fled out of sight toward Ocate.

Larry had thought it strange that so many riders should be abroad at that hour of the night, but he reflected that no one bothered the cattle it was not his affair.

Still, he was thinking of the riders as he rode through the basin; and when he saw, far over toward the southern side of the basin, a dark blot moving against the luminous horizon, he decided to investigate.

Hitting his horse a slap, he headed toward the blot; and when he saw that it continued to move toward him, he sent his horse into an arroyo where, in the shadows, he would not be seen by the rider.

Farther on, Larry was forced to ascend the slope of the arroyo; but he did not expose himself to view, seeking the sheltering shadows of some small fir-balsams that grew along the edge of a barranca.

The rider continued to approach, and Larry, growing intensely curious, at last urged his horse straight for the rider.

They met near the bottom of the southern slope, and when Larry got over his surprise he found himself listening intently.

For the rider was a woman—the Mexican woman employed by Amos Seddon as his housekeeper. She told a tale in her guttural jargon that made Larry's face turn dead white as he listened.

"Theeze man come," the woman said; "he's tell me he's come to love Miz' Seddon. He's say Lucia Morell send him—she say Miz' Seddon make love plenty. He's knock me down an' tie me, an' put rag on my mouth when

I—what you call—kick. Then he's ron after Miz' Seddon. She's go upstairs an' lock herself in her room—an' he's try to bust the door down. I git loose an' come—hunt for somebuddy to help."

Larry did not hear any other words the Mexican woman said. Nor did he wait to ride to some of the other men he knew were in the basin. Before the Mexican woman had entirely finished her story, Larry's horse was on the run, and he went up the long slope with a speed that made the Mexican woman, following slowly after him, catch her breath in astonishment.

It was a long ride up the slope, and Larry's horse was almost winded when he reached the crest. And during the short interval when Larry stopped to breathe the animal, he intently examined the six-shooter at his hip.

Then he went on again, urging the horse with quirt and spur; and when he came within sight of the ranchhouse, the horse, now thoroughly warmed to his work, was covering ground with a speed that filled Larry with a grim exultation.

For the first time in his life Larry did not waste time being particular about trailing the reins over the animal's head. He gave them a fling, and was out of the saddle on the instant, running toward the ranchhouse, gun in hand.

As he neared the side door he heard a scream—a

woman's scream, shrill with a frenzied terror. He went through the side door with a bound. In another instant he was running lightly through the lower rooms, searching them. Finding nothing, he started for the stairs, and when at the foot of them he heard another scream, this time carrying a despairing note.

In the next instant Larry was at the top of the stairs, looking down the hall, his eyes ablaze.

He saw a big man smashing down a door with an ax. The door was almost down, and a succession of screams issued from the other side of it.

At almost the instant Larry saw the man, the man turned and saw Larry. He reached for the pistol at his hip. Grinning derisively, Larry shot him—twice—sending the bullets with a venom that told of his deadly intentions.

The man made no sound—sagging forward, clutching at his chest, his face malignant with hate.

And then there was a short silence, during which Larry stepped over the man's body and peered through the shattered door into the room at a white-faced girl who fainted when she heard his:

"That locoed son-of-a-gun sure must have scared you some—didn't he, ma'am?"

CHAPTER XXXII

LUCIA'S REVENGE

COMPTON did not ride far with the other members of his band. After Val Davis left them to ride to the Three Bar, Compton accompanied the others about a mile; then he brought them all to a halt with a short command.

"Kinney and Morgan and myself are going to town to see how this thing shapes up. The rest of you hit the breeze to the Two Link and cache that stuff. There'll be a big divvy when this blows over. Get going!"

As the other members of the band fled northward, Compton dismounted, and with some bunch grass he obliterated the white artificial marks he and Morgan had made on Morgan's black horse. During the process Morgan chuckled gleefully.

"That bit of whitewash will get Rand in a heap of trouble, looks like!" he said.

The three men mounted again, and began a leisurely ride to town. When they entered the street they saw the stage in front of the express company's office, the passengers clustered around it, talking excitedly.

Compton and the others dismounted in front of the Gilt

Edge, and hitched their horses to a rail. Grinning with satisfaction and interest, they walked down the street a little distance, until they were able to look into the lighted office of the express company across the street. Chuckling lowly, they saw Moggs and Toban inside—Toban making emphatic motions with his hands—Moggs listening to him, frowning.

Later, still standing in the shadows on the opposite side of the street, they saw Val Davis ride in and dismount in front of the office. They saw Moggs drag Davis inside and question him; and they gleefully noted the sincerity of Davis' manner.

"He's sure all there when it comes to spreadin' the soft-soap," said Morgan. "I wonder what old Moggs would say if he knowed Val had been foolin' him all this time?"

The three men were in the rear room of the Gilt Edge during the excitement which attended the efforts of Moggs to summon the members of his vigilance committee. They entered the room from an outside door, at the rear of the building, Labrue himself opening the door for them after getting a glimpse of Morgan's face at one of the side windows.

And in the rear room, the door opening into the dance-hall closed against any of the curious who might have wondered, Compton, Morgan, and Kinney played cards

and drank until Moggs and his vigilantes rode out of town.

Then Davis joined them, chuckling, and recounting to them the story of his personal experiences, not forgetting to tell them he had sent Rand "hittin' the Las Vegas trail—hard!"

Later, leaving the others in the rear room, Compton passed through the dance-hall to the barroom, where he drank at the bar with Labrue.

Compton had not emerged from the rear room until the discordant noise from the piano in the dance-hall ceased; and when he passed through the room it was deserted, the begrimed chimneys of the kerosene lamps casting a weak glare over the dirty floor, over the empty glasses and bottles strewn here and there; the card-tables, their tops thick with spilled liquors. The atmosphere of the room reeked with the odors of stale tobacco smoke and strong drink—lingering memories of the night's wild debauch.

Compton had been talking with Labrue for some time, until the gray dawn stole into the windows and imparted a ghastly, faded-out appearance to the interior of the building. Then, hearing a woman's voice issue from a rear room, Compton and Labrue both turned and faced in that direction.

"That's Lucia," grinned Labrue. "She's been hittin'

the booze pretty heavy tonight. First time I ever knew her to lose her head!"

A door opened as Labrue and Compton watched, and Lucia Morell stepped out. Her hair was in disorder—strands of it sticking out maudlinly beyond the mass that wreathed her head; her dark eyes were flashing with a wild and wanton light; and as she emerged from the room she staggered, flinging her arms wide against the door-jambs to steady herself.

"She's been entertaining a greaser—from down Lincoln way," laughed Labrue. "Manuel Correjo, the outlaw—tin-horn, rustler—anything," went on Labrue. "He hits town about twice a year. Until now, Lucia wouldn't even look at him. But when a woman gets one of those spells—" He paused, as though attempts at further expression were futile.

Lucia was not as drunk as she seemed. Since the departure of Correjo, some hours before, Lucia had been sitting at a table in the rear room, the door locked, sleeping, her head resting on the table.

When she saw Compton standing with Labrue at the bar, she laughed shrilly, with discordant venom.

"It's Link Compton!" she said. And she left the door and walked uncertainly forward until she stood within a few feet of the two men.

She did not look at Labrue; she watched Compton with

sneering, wanton eyes, which were blazing with contempt and hate.

"Bah!" she sneered, straightening as she faced Compton, her hands on her hips, her chin thrust belligerently forward. "You're bilked, Compton, do you know that? You can stand there and grin, thinking you are wise. But you're not wise.

"I've fixed you for treating me like a dog—and I've fixed Rand—for turning me down. Do you hear? I went to Rand and told him the truth. I double-crossed *you*! But Rand wouldn't have me. He told me he'd roast in hell before he'd ever look at me again! Ha, ha!

"He thinks Eleanor Seddon is pure and innocent; and you think she's pure and innocent. That's why you wanted her. Bah! You men make me sick!"

She laughed, and the sound of it brought a gleam of disgust into Labrue's eyes. He stepped to her side, took her by an arm, and shoved her roughly toward the dance-hall, from which ran the stairs to the second story.

"You're drunk," he said; "go to bed."

Labrue's arm was knocked away, and Compton stepped close to Lucia.

"This is my affair," Compton told Labrue gruffly. "She's said some things that I want explained." He leaned toward the woman; she should have been warned by the sinister gleam of his eyes as he grinned at her.

"How have you fixed me? What have you done?" he said contemptuously.

Lucia laughed, looking up into Compton's face, but not catching the queer, cold glare in his eyes.

"I've fixed her — for both of you; for you and Rand!" she jeered. "Do you know Correjo — that tin-horn oiler I was with tonight? Well, I sent him to the Bar S last night, long before midnight. I told him Eleanor Seddon had taken a shine to him, and that she had told me that the next time he struck town I should send him to her. And I sent him. I told him not to be afraid of her; I told him ——"

Labrue tried to grasp Compton's arm as he struck. He failed by a narrow margin, and was himself thrown to his knees by the shock of Lucia's body striking him as she fell.

Before Labrue could get to his feet, Compton had bounded to the rear room, yelling for Morgan and Kinney. And before Labrue could examine Lucia to see how badly she had been hurt, Compton, Morgan, and Kinney had burst out of the front door of the saloon and were riding furiously out of town toward the Bar S.

CHAPTER XXXIII

FAITHFUL UNTO DEATH

IT HAD taken Larry Redfern many minutes to restore Eleanor Seddon to consciousness, but he was finally rewarded by seeing her open her eyes and look at him in a dazed manner. He had carried her downstairs and laid her on a big couch in the sitting-room.

It was there she had opened her eyes to see Larry standing before her; and she sat up instantly, looking at him fearfully, as though she was not quite sure that he, too, was not of the type of man who had attacked her.

But something she saw in Larry's frank, honest eyes reassured her, and she smiled at him, a little wildly, shuddering at the recollection of what had happened.

"Where is he?" she began. "Did you——"

Larry grinned. "I reckon I did, ma'am. He won't go rampagin' around the country no more, botherin' women. I sure handed him plenty!"

"Who are you?" she asked. "And how did it happen that you — came — just in time?"

"I'm Larry Redfern, ma'am. I'm range boss for the Three Bar — Rand's ranch. I reckon you know him, ma'am," he grinned. "An' I was in the big basin when

this here greaser woman housekeeper of yours rides down an tells me about what's happened."

"Oh!" she exclaimed. "You are Larry. I've heard Rand speak of you. You can help me. For I want to see him—to warn him—about something. I must see him!"

She got up and ran to the kitchen, where she got a towel and dried her face—for Larry had used much water in his efforts to restore her to consciousness.

"You can go with me," she told Larry, as she returned to the room. "You go out and get Silver—my horse—ready. Give him a drink—he's been without water since last night. Oh, do hurry, please! I'll be out in just a minute!"

Larry grinned and turned, walking toward the door. He had just reached it when Amos Seddon stepped on the threshold, his eyes alight with wonder.

The girl saw him as he stepped inside the room, and she ran to him and began to blurt out the story of the night's happenings.

Seddon's face paled at the grim news; and when she began to speak of Rand and the boy, Bud, he led her into his office and sat down in a chair, tenderly drawing her to him.

For he meant to tell her, to confess his misdeeds, and ask her forgiveness.

He had come into the ranchhouse for that purpose. The influence of Compton's smooth words had not endured. Conscience was at work on Seddon, and he knew he would never have any peace until he told Eleanor the truth.

"Ellie," he said, "The housekeeper told the truth — Rand's boy, Bud, is my boy. Rand knows it. I — wasn't man enough to ——"

He paused, listening. And to the ears of both came the rushing beat of hoofs upon the hard sand of the dooryard.

Getting up and pushing Eleanor from him, Seddon looked out of the open door and saw Compton, Kinney, and Morgan just dismounting from their horses within fifty feet of the house.

Seddon stepped back from the door, his face white.

"Somethin's happened, Ellie," he said; "them men is in an awful hurry!"

Before Seddon could say more, the men were inside the office. Compton came first, and the others crowded in behind him.

Compton's breath was coming rapidly, for he and the men had had a hard ride, but there was a gleam of relief in his eyes when he saw Eleanor; and he stepped toward her, smiling.

"You escaped him, eh? Lucia Morell told me. God! how frightened I was. I kept seeing you fighting that damned outlaw ——" He paused, noting the coldness of

her look—though he attributed it to shock. "He came, didn't he?"

"Yes," she said evenly, "he came."

"Did he get away?" He stiffened and looked at Kinney and Morgan, ready to order them to search for Correjo should the girl reply affirmatively.

He started when the girl said slowly: "He is dead."

"Who—" he began, looking at Seddon, thinking Seddon had saved her.

The girl interrupted him, saying coldly:

"That isn't important," she said in a low, intense tone. "*That* is over. It was very good of you to come here to see if I had been attacked, and to punish the man. But have you the manhood to ride to the Three Bar, to wait there until the vigilance committee, *your* vigilance committee—the one you spoke about last night over near the Red Buttes—comes to hang Rand? Have you the manhood to tell that committee that it was you, and not Rand, who robbed the stage last night?"

Compton stiffened, his muscles twitching and his face turning crimson. For an instant he stood, looking hard at the girl; then his face paled, his eyes gleamed with a mocking light, and he leaned toward her.

"Where were you when I did that talking?"

"On the hill at the edge of the draw near the Red Buttes," she said. "I had ridden there, and I saw you

and your men rob the stage. Then you rode to the base of the hill and told your men ——”

Compton laughed, “So you heard that, eh?”

There had come a change in the man. The smooth blandness of his manner—that he had always affected in her presence—had gone. His mouth was now cruel, the lips in a snarling pout; his eyes were savage, narrowing with a cold malevolence that chilled the girl. While she stood watching him, fascinated by the change that had come over him, he spoke again.

“So you heard that, eh?” he repeated. “You heard me say that I was going to blame Rand for robbing the stage; and Lucia Morell told you the truth about Rand’s boy. By this time, I suppose, you are sure I’ve been trying to make a fool of you.

“Well, I have. I don’t deny it. And I’m going to continue to make a fool of you. Understand that? No one can prevent me. I want you, and I’m going to take you. You belong to me!”

Stepping forward, he seized her, drawing her toward him and smothering her in his embrace, despite her struggles, while he laughed aloud, full-throatedly, vibrantly, the sound moving the girl to a frenzy of terror.

“Daddy!” she called, her voice stifled by her nearness to Compton.

Seddon cursed hideously. Until now he had been

stunned by Compton's action; he had stood there, not understanding the significance of their words.

But he did understand the plea in Eleanor's voice; it was an appeal to the protective instinct in him.

Leaping, he struck at Compton, with a malignance that threw him entirely off balance when his fist missed its target. He crashed against Compton, striking the man with his shoulder, reeled, stumbled, and fell near the door.

The impact of Seddon's shoulder had sent Compton reeling, so that he was forced to release the girl to keep himself from falling.

He regained his balance, and wheeled, snarling, to face Seddon, who was scrambling to his feet, drunk with rage and resentment.

Seddon clawed at his holster while rising, and when he reached his feet the gun was in his hand. He stood, his legs sprawled, braced, his body in a crouch, his eyes wild with defiance and contempt.

"Damn your soul, Compton, this has gone far enough!" he shrieked. "I've stood for enough of your lies an' schemes. I'm through. This settles it! You get out of this house, an' stay out! If you ever stick your nose around here again, I'll kill you sure as hell!

"I'm through. I'm runnin' a new trail. I've told the girl about the boy — I've confessed to her. An' hereafter I'm runnin' straight. You an' your damned bunch of

outlaws are goin' it alone. I'm honest from now on—an' I stay honest! You get out an' leave me an' my girl. Ah!" he finished.

The muzzle of his weapon leaped upward, fire streaking from it with the movement. But just a pulse-beat in advance of the report of his pistol came another—Kinney's. Kinney had caught a certain significant gleam in Compton's eyes as for an instant they had met his, and he knew that the look, directed at him, could mean but one thing.

There was no Rand before Kinney now, to paralyze his muscles or to cloud his brain; and his bullet went true. Seddon's muscles did not even twitch after he struck the floor. He fell with an appearance of finality unmistakable.

The three men stood silent while Eleanor ran to the body, knelt beside it, and yielded to the hysteria that seized her. She got to her feet after an instant and ran at Kinney, screaming that he was a murderer; then, her mood changing, she faced Compton, and with bitter invective charged him with the murder. Then, observing that her words had no effect upon the sullen-faced group, she cried aloud, impotently, and fell upon her father's body, sobbing convulsively.

It was not a pleasant scene—even for the three men. They stood, watching the girl—Kinney's face wreathed

in a half-sneering surface grin, which went no deeper than the skin; Morgan watched palely, his eyes shifting, the muscles of his face twitching. Compton, his lips in a terrible pout, stood back, his face pallid, watching the girl.

Larry Redfern, watering Silver back of the stable, heard the shots. His first thought was that he had not killed the Mexican after all, and that the man had revived and had again attacked Eleanor.

Larry ran toward the house, drawing his gun. He had been on the far side of the stable when Compton and the others rode up, and he had not heard nor seen them. But as he ran toward the house he saw their horses near the door of the office. And when he got within several paces of the office door he heard Eleanor scream.

While Compton and the others were watching Eleanor, Larry reached the open doorway. He was standing on the threshold when they saw him, his eyes blazing with wrath, the dark tube of his six-shooter menacing them.

For an instant there was no sound, except for Larry's heavy breathing and the convulsive sobbing of the girl on the floor.

Then Larry crouched; his eyes flaming, his muscles tensed.

"What you guys done?" he demanded.

Hearing his voice, Eleanor turned to look at him, exposing her father's face.

"Hell's fire!" snapped Larry; "it's Seddon! You skunks have killed him!"

Compton smiled mirthlessly. "It was an accident, Redfern," he said; "Kinney and Seddon were scuffling, and Kinney's gun went off."

"You lie!" screamed the girl, getting to her feet and facing Compton. "That man" — pointing to Kinney — "deliberately shot him—I saw it! It was murder—plain, cruel murder!"

Larry's face worked spasmodically. He hated Compton — for Compton would have killed him that day in the basin had he turned his back for an instant; and he knew Kinney as a merciless gunfighter who had come to the section for the deliberate purpose of killing Rand; he also knew Morgan as a mean, vitriolic-tempered trouble-hunter who, while not so bloodthirsty as Kinney, had killed many men. Also, Larry knew that Rand loved Eleanor Seddon, and that whatever he could do for the girl he would be doing for Rand.

He knew, too, that these men were tricky; that he must be careful how he moved, and that for not an instant must he permit his eyes to stray from them.

Already he saw Kinney watching him with a cold, alert, and speculating gaze; and he knew that if he took his gaze off the man for a second the other would draw the gun that he yearned to use.

Larry stepped into the room, moving lightly, his muscles tensed, ready for action, his eyes glittering.

He intended to get into a better position—where the men would be just a trifle farther from him, and not so nearly in line—so that one might not leap behind another and he be unable to shoot him. And he was moving according to his purpose when Eleanor, seemingly not realizing the danger, stepped toward him, holding out her hands to him in mute appeal.

"Get back!" he said gruffly, to her.

She turned—a trifle too late. For Morgan had leaped at Larry's words, straight toward Larry, and when Eleanor, tardily understanding Larry, moved sidewise, she stepped directly in front of Morgan, and Larry could not use his gun.

Larry swung swiftly in the opposite direction at the instant Compton leaped at him from the other side. There was no chance for either of the three men to use their guns, for Eleanor was too close to Larry.

Larry, however, used his. But it went off just as Compton's hand closed on Larry's wrist—the bullet going into the ceiling as Morgan, using the butt of his gun, smashed Larry on the head, sending him crashing to the floor in the center of the room.

When Larry regained consciousness he was lying where he had fallen—in the center of the room.

At first objects about him were strangely blurred, and Larry's head ached so that he did not attempt to look again. But he heard voices—Compton's and Eleanor's.

Compton's voice was mocking, triumphant.

"You'll go with me," he said; "to the Two Link. If you don't go of your own free will, I'll carry you. However it is to be done, you go. That's the only way I can keep you from talking about what you saw last night!"

Larry made a great effort, and opened his eyes again. This time he saw Compton and Eleanor. The other men were not in the room.

Compton had crowded Eleanor into a corner; he was holding her tightly against the wall, and the girl was moving her head from side to side—frenziedly—trying to keep Compton's lips from hers. For he held her arms at her sides, but he could not force her to keep her head motionless.

"Damn you!" he cursed, his voice thick with passion; "I'll kiss you before we leave this room!"

Larry reached for his gun—the holster was empty. The gun must have fallen from his hand when he had got the blow on the head.

Rand, Larry reflected, would not like Compton to kiss his girl; and it was with this odd thought in mind that Larry stealthily lifted his head to look for the weapon he had dropped. Loyalty to Rand was what was forcing

Larry to search for his gun—for every movement he made was torture; and several times as he turned his head to look for the weapon he came near to tumbling over, to yield to the terrible nausea that afflicted him.

Compton persisted, and Eleanor continued to resist. Larry did not know how long. He finally found the pistol, raised himself to a sitting posture and leveled the weapon at Compton. He thought he was holding it steadily, but instead it was waving in eccentric circles, and only occasionally was it directed at Compton.

"Compton!" called Larry.

At the sound of the voice Compton wheeled toward him.

However, he did not release Eleanor. For at the instant Compton wheeled, Larry was speaking again, drunkenly, to Eleanor, while he lurched weakly from side to side, almost falling with each movement.

"If you'll move a little, ma'am," he said; "I'll sure perforate that coyote that's got you penned up."

Compton did not move, then. He waited until the pistol in Larry's hand described a wide, eccentric circle. And when the pistol was marking the widest radius of the circle, Compton flashed around and drew his own gun.

Its roar mingled with the report of Larry's pistol—for Larry had noted the swift movement and had blindly pulled the trigger. Larry's bullet went wild, striking the

wall near Compton. Compton's aim, though, had been true.

Larry shivered, the gun dropped from his nerveless hand; he sighed, and lurched gently forward, falling on his face and turning slowly over on his back, where he lay, motionless, a dark stain appearing on the front of his shirt, near the heart.

CHAPTER XXXIV

A MAN IN A DOORWAY

IT HAD taken Rand some time to find his men in the basin; and it had taken much more time to get them out of the basin and upon the big level that stretched away toward the Red Buttes. It was in the hour of the early morning when darkness is deepest that Rand and the six Three Bar punchers struck the edge of the big level and, after halting to breathe their horses, sent them running westward. And the ghostly dawn had come when the horsemen reached the Red Buttes and dismounted, to try to pick up the trail of the stage robbers.

The story of the holdup was written in the deep dust that covered the ground in the vicinity of the trail. Darting here and there, Rand could see hoof tracks which told him that the robbers had come from the north; that they had separated when reaching the point where the robbery had occurred—some of them hiding in a break between the buttes; others concealing themselves in an arroyo beside the trail. Rand could even see where the passengers had stood—and other marks in the dust on the western side of the trail told him where Toban, the driver, had stood.

Rand followed the hoofprints to a sand draw east of the trail. There, he observed, the men had halted, for a few minutes only. Then, according to the tale written in the sand, they had fled northward.

Rand smiled grimly when he had read the signs thus far.

For Val Davis had told him the robbers had ridden southward. Therefore, Davis had lied!

Why?

Rand did not pause to conjecture over that. His shout brought the other men to his side; and by the time they reached him he was in the saddle himself.

"Davis has been romancin', boys!" he told the other men. "The robbers went north—most of them. There's one track leadin' east—direct. I'm goin' that way. You boys hit the breeze to town an' tell Moggs to give you more men. Then pick up the trail again. Town ain't much out of your way. Slope!"

Midnight was running hard by the time Rand gave his final order, with his rider leaning far over to trace the hoofprints that, deep in the light, feathery dust, led eastward over rise and depression, as straight as a horse could travel.

That the horse had been ridden by one of the stage robbers Rand had no doubt—for the animal had been traveling fast—Rand could tell that from the grouping

of the hoofprints, from their depth, and by the singular way the trailing dust had fallen after the horse had passed.

"Throwin' dust like a scared jack rabbit!" mused Rand.

His horse running, still heading eastward, a worried and perplexed frown began to gather on Rand's brow. The Bar S lay straight east. And the tracks led eastward. Could that mean that Seddon had been in the gang that had robbed the stage?

Rand did not want to believe that, and yet he kept Midnight going fast, for he was determined to run the rider down. If the rider were Seddon, so much the worse for him. If the rider was not Seddon, Rand would have a better chance to catch him—for Seddon would stop at the Bar S, and he would have had time to conceal all traces of his guilt. But another man—though he might stop at the Bar S, would have to go on again. And no matter how far the race, or how fast the pace, Rand had faith in Midnight's ability to win.

He was near the Bar S when he saw a figure on the level ahead of him—a horse and rider, distinct in the growing daylight. He drove Midnight ahead at a faster pace, and when he came up to the other he saw the rider was the Mexican woman who worked for Seddon.

The woman had seen him coming, and she wheeled her

horse to face him as Midnight plunged up, snorting with impatience.

"*Bueno dias!*" she exclaimed, when she recognized Rand. "You hurry. Miz' Seddon in heap trouble. I send theeze man — Larry — to help. Other men come — I see — fi' — ten — fifteen minutes ago. You hurry, *amigo!*"

That explained the tracks leading to the Bar S. One of the robbers had taken this trail; it had led him to the Bar S, and he had attacked Eleanor.

Midnight ran, now. For the man on his back was using his spurs as he had never used them before; and Midnight, stung to desperation by the biting steel, tried his best to meet the demands his master was imposing upon him.

The Bar S seemed to be deserted when Rand arrived. When Midnight came to a sliding halt near the door that opened into Seddon's office, there was not a person in sight.

Rand leaped from Midnight, drew one of his guns as he ran to the door, bounded inside and halted, drawing a shrill, amazed breath and standing, rigid for an instant, his face going chalk white as he looked at the upturned face of his friend, the lips in a satisfied half-smile.

Rand saw Seddon, too; but it was at Larry's side that he knelt, the blood pounding at his temples; his breath lagging in his throat; his brain afire, reeling — for the

first time entirely in the grip of that terrible lust that he had fought all his days.

Had Compton, Kinney, and Morgan chanced upon him now, they might have killed him without risk to themselves. For his head was bowed as he knelt beside Larry; and he saw nothing but the pallid face of his friend, the slight smile on the lips.

"Damn them, Larry!" he said, in a dry, light voice. "Damn them — they've killed you, they've killed you!"

Compton, Kinney, and Morgan did not come to kill Rand, because at that moment — and for several minutes before the arrival of Rand, they were intensely occupied elsewhere.

When Compton carried Eleanor out of the office after he had shot Larry, he went directly to his horse. Kinney and Morgan had gone out some time before to leave Compton alone with the girl; and when Compton carried Eleanor out, the two men were watering their horses near the windmill.

Compton was forced to set Eleanor down for an instant while he tightened a loose cinch; and the girl, passive enough until that instant, broke from his grasp and ran toward Silver.

She was halfway in the saddle when Compton reached her; but the gray horse was already on the run and Comp-

ton could not catch him. He yelled to the other men, and they clambered on their horses and raced after the gray.

Compton, too, mounted and rode recklessly, in pursuit.

The girl, though, intensely excited, did not escape. She sent Silver around the stable, intending to ride to the Three Bar, where she supposed Rand to be; but when Silver dashed around the stable he ran directly into Morgan and Kinney—who had ridden around the other way to intercept her.

Before she could maneuver Silver to get him into his stride on a straightaway run, Morgan's horse had lurched into the gray, and Morgan's hand was at the gray's bridle.

She fought hard to escape, even then—kicking at the men as they dragged her from the saddle; scratching Morgan's face until the man cursed her viciously. But in the end she was again in Compton's arms, with his gloating, triumphant eyes looking into hers, and his lips wreathed in a mocking smile.

Then she heard a shout; felt Compton straighten and stiffen; saw Morgan and Kinney start and look toward the river trail.

She looked, too; and she saw Moggs and his men not more than a hundred yards away, just topping a rise which had concealed them from view as they were riding toward the stable.

There were twenty men in the Moggs posse; and when they rode up to where Compton, Kinney, and Morgan were standing—Compton's arms still around the girl—their faces were set with sullen inquiry.

Moggs was the leader; he dismounted near Compton and the girl and said, gruffly:

"What's happened here, Compton? What does this mean?"

Before Compton could reply Eleanor wrenched herself free and grasped Moggs frantically by the arms and told him what had happened.

Moggs' face whitened; there were low mutterings of rage from the other men of the posse. For these men were recruited from the best type of Ocate's inhabitants, and few of them admired Compton and his two friends.

"We'll see about this!" declared Moggs. "You two guys get off your horses and toddle along ahead of us. There's a hell of a lot of things that have got to be explained about last night's work!"

Sullenly, Compton, Kinney, and Morgan dismounted. Three men of the posse took charge of the animals, and the group moved forward—turning a corner of the stable and proceeding slowly toward the ranchhouse.

They had almost reached the latter—Compton, Kinney, and Morgan in the lead; with Compton smiling smoothly because he had nothing to fear from the posse

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—having completely enmeshed Rand—when as though by prearrangement every man in the group halted, looking intently forward, their faces paling, their eyes wide with amazement.

For in the office doorway—his face dead white; his eyes blazing with a cold, wanton light; a heavy pistol in each hand—was Rand.

CHAPTER XXXV

THE GRIM ACCOUNTING

THOUGH Moggs and the men of his posse had been at the Three Bar—there finding the evidence of Rand's guilt in the shape of a canvas bag filled with gold dust belonging to the express company; finding also, the black mask mentioned by Val Davis—Moggs and his men made no hostile move when they saw Rand standing in the office doorway.

They wanted Rand—they had thought they were determined to take him; but in their hearts and in their minds at this minute had grown a mighty indecision.

There were men in the group who looked furtively at one another; there were those who kept their gaze upon Rand, their eyes glowing with wonder and dread; there were others who looked downward quickly after one flashing glance at the man, yielding to the paralysis of dread that had seized them.

Moggs, a brave man, thrilled with queer emotion as he watched Rand. A wave of cold, clammy perspiration ran over Morgan, a mirthless, sneering smirk wreathed Kinney's lips; Compton, pale and silent, seemed fascinated by what he saw in Rand.

For it was not the Rand these men knew who faced them now. That reluctance which they had all seen in him; the atmosphere of repression that always had seemed to surround him, hinting of passions controlled or dormant—that something in him which had made men hesitate to do violence in his presence; the lingering threat of his manner; the sinister, suppressed, destructive impulses which had made him a puzzle to all men—all these were no more.

In the Rand that watched them now was no indecision; there was no evidence of conflict of passion in his eyes, in his manner, or in his movements. There was nothing but implacable determination and the wanton will to kill.

They all saw it—it was unmistakable, conclusive. It was the only thought in his brain; the one certain passion of his mind—irrevocable, absolute.

While one might have counted one hundred the scene held. Then lungs sighed in process of deflation—indicating that all had forgotten to breathe—and the men began to slip sidewise—away from the line of Rand's vision, which seemed to be centered upon Compton, Kinney, and Morgan.

Eleanor, like the others, had been held in the clutch of dread and wonder that had gripped them all. She was dazed; she seemed to hear someone speaking to her—it was Moggs, and he was repeating over and over:

"Move to one side, move to one side—" insistently, softly. And then she felt his hand on her arm, tugging hard at it, and she felt herself moving as the others moved, out of the line of Rand's vision—away from Compton, Kinney, and Morgan.

"He's after Compton, Kinney, and Morgan," the girl heard Moggs saying; "God! Isn't he terrible!"

Cold, alert, moving as a panther moves, with smooth, flowing undulations, Rand stepped down from the threshold of the doorway and made his way to within twenty-five or thirty feet of the three men of the Two Link.

There he stopped and stood looking at them; and the cold, yellow flame in his eyes danced like the glare of a winter sun on ice.

Inside the office, kneeling over the body of his friend, Rand had caught the whispered word—repeated several times—through the stiffening lips:

"Compton."

Larry had seemed to know that Rand was kneeling over him; he had seemed to know that Rand would avenge him; and he was trying to tell Rand so there would be no mistake.

And, kneeling there, Rand had answered his whisper with:

"I'll get him, Larry."

But when he had stood in the doorway just an instant

before, and had seen the two men who were with Compton, he knew that all of them had been concerned with the shooting of Larry. And he had determined that all must pay the penalty.

Facing them now, with only the few feet of space intervening, he laughed lowly, without mirth, without expression.

"You sneakin' coyotes are goin' to die." There was bitter sarcasm in his voice as he continued:

"I've got my guns out—an' so there ain't a chance for you if you draw one at a time. But there's a big chance if you all sling your guns together. You could all think together when you framed up on Larry. You didn't give him a chance—you were afraid. You shot him down like a dog. Flash your guns, you whelps—for I'm shootin'—now!"

No doubt the three men strove for concerted action. That thought was in the brain of each man—Rand saw it in their quickened eyes; he detected the thought before their muscles leaped to do the will of their minds.

The irony of it, though, was apparent to many of the men who watched. For Rand had set them an impossible task.

Kinney, his gun hand trained to the sensitive impulses of his trade, was the first to draw his pistol. His hand moved like a streak of light—downward, then upward

with the same motion. But his fingers were already loosening when he pulled the trigger; and while he was toppling forward, to lurch heavily into the dust after his weapon, Rand's pistols were flaming death to the others.

Morgan drew second, a flashing instant in advance of Compton; but Morgan's gun went off before he could throw its muzzle to a level—a spasmodic movement caused by the shock of Rand's bullet striking him. Several bullets were reserved for Compton—for Rand's gun belched flame in a continuous streak as the big man crumpled and sank in his tracks.

The silence which followed the shooting endured long. Through it Rand stood, his chin on his chest, looking down at the bodies of his fallen enemies.

He shuddered as he watched them; muttered:

"I reckon that's all, Larry," and turned, not seeming to know or care that there were other men near him—striding slowly back into the office, where he again knelt beside the body of his friend.

Outside, Moggs, a pale, strained expression in his eyes, said, hoarsely, to Eleanor:

"Yes, I reckon that *is* all. I hate to do it—and I reckon there'll be more hell to pay. But I've got to take him for robbing the stage."

"Who?" demanded Eleanor, startled, Moggs' words stirring her from the depths of horror into which the

shooting had plunged her. "Take whom?" she demanded.

"Rand," said Moggs, "there's evidence that he done it."

Eleanor laughed, the hysteria of eagerness in her voice. She was stunned with the weight of the tragic events that had descended upon her during the past few hours; she was frantic with grief over the death of her father—but she had seen, and she had meant to save Rand from becoming the victim of Compton's plot. She looked at Moggs with the truth in her eyes.

And after she had told him and the others who crowded around her what had happened—what she had seen at the Red Buttes—and she saw that they were not quite convinced, she looked around wildly until her gaze rested upon Morgan's black horse, which Compton had ridden the night before, and which had carried him to the Bar S.

She saw the dull white spots on the black—the grayish remnants of that which had once been white—staining the black hair of the animal—the oval above the left foreleg, and the spot on the right hip.

"There! There!" she cried. "Don't you see?"

And when Moggs and the others had examined the spots on the black horse, and had led Midnight beside the other so that they might compare them, the girl declared triumphantly:

"Oh, don't you see? If you doubt Rand you are fools!"

They did not doubt long; for they nodded to each other and smiled, and several of them said: "We might have knowed it."

And the girl, hearing them and seeing their nods, reflected as she went toward the office that she had doubted him longer—and with less cause. But, she told herself, as she looked into the office, and with streaming eyes was led away again by some men of the posse, she would never doubt him again.

It seemed, some time later, when she was sitting on the front porch staring mutely into the shimmering glare of the morning sun, that a whisper floated to her on the slight breeze.

"Your father will live," said the whisper. And she looked around to see Rand standing near her, an odd light in his eyes.

"Larry, too," he added, "he wasn't hurt bad. Nor your father. The doc. has been with them for a little while—he's goin' to stay until they both get out of danger."

She made him say it again—all of it. And then she got up and stood beside him, saying nothing. And for a long time they stood on the porch, close together, their eyes on the broad plains stretching before them, and upon

the endless miles of glowing sunshine that was rapidly banishing the shadows of the night.

And the men of the posse, seeing them there, smiled understandingly and passed on, to nod and to whisper of those things that all men know.

CHAPTER XXXVI

IN PATHS OF PEACE

A MONTH later two convalescents were lounging in big easy chairs on the porch of the Bar S ranch-house. Both convalescents were thin, looking as though the margin between life and death for them had been very narrow; but both were cheerful—and the grins with which they watched three persons coming toward them were broad, expansive grins, pregnant with satisfaction. Peace, of a kind that the Bar S had not known for many days had settled over the ranch-house and all felt that it was good.

However, only two of the three were walking; the other, much smaller in stature, was being carried. He was perched upon the hands of the other two—upon crossed hands that formed a square made by gripping wrists. The three were yet a great distance off.

“Larry,” said one convalescent, “she likes the durned little cuss!”

“Sure,” said Larry. “Seddon,” he added, eyeing the other steadily, “you’re a damned crank about that boy. You spend half your time ravin’ about him, an’ the other half wonderin’ if Eleanor an’ Rand like him. Look at

'em!" he sneered. "Carryin' the little sucker on their hands, an' Rand grinnin' all over like a tomcat!"

"Hush!" said Seddon in a low voice. "Don't ever say that where he can hear you. I called him that once — an' Ellie told him — before she knowed who he was."

"You don't say!" ejaculated Larry.

"I — I called him — worse," confessed Seddon.

"You don't say!"

"An' he wasn't," said Seddon.

"Wasn't what!"

"What I said."

"Of course not — he wasn't," agreed Larry.

"Wasn't what?" demanded Seddon.

"What you said," went on Larry. "He's worse — a whole lot worse."

"Meanin'?"

"That he's a love-sick coyote!" declared Larry. "He goes around grinnin' an' slappin' folks on the back, an' showin' he's tickled clear down to his boots. He's changed more'n any man I ever seen. He ain't full of them killin' streaks any more; he's softy an' gentle an' lovin' an' — aw, hell — he ain't! He's a damned lovable idiot!"

"Larry," said Seddon softly.

"Yep."

"Have a care! You're cussin' again, my boy."

"Well?"

"Rand never told you — did he?"

"Told me what?"

"That he taught Bud to cuss — just to get Ellie to come an' see him — over at his place?"

"The son-of-a-gun! He didn't!"

"He did!"

"The son-of-a-gun!" Larry grinned admiringly. "Well, what do you think of that!" he said. "An' did the little cuss do it?"

"Well, now," began Seddon, "he made a mighty good try at——"

But here were two men who were talking trivialities.

Rand and Eleanor and Bud were speaking with rare intelligence as they came toward the porch. The two "interested parties" did not seem to mind Bud's presence at all.

"I liked you the first time I saw you," confessed Eleanor, blushing.

Rand grinned. "I beat you to it. I loved *you* before I saw you. And," he added reprovingly, "I never stopped lovin' you!"

Bud saw a reproachful light in Eleanor's eyes as he looked up at her from his throne of hands. He thought he detected signs of storm in the love atmosphere.

"If you get mad at each other I'll cuss!" he threatened.

"We won't get mad," laughed Eleanor.

"Never?" questioned Bud, looking from one to the other.

"Never!" both answered.

And Bud was borne to the porch in triumph.





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